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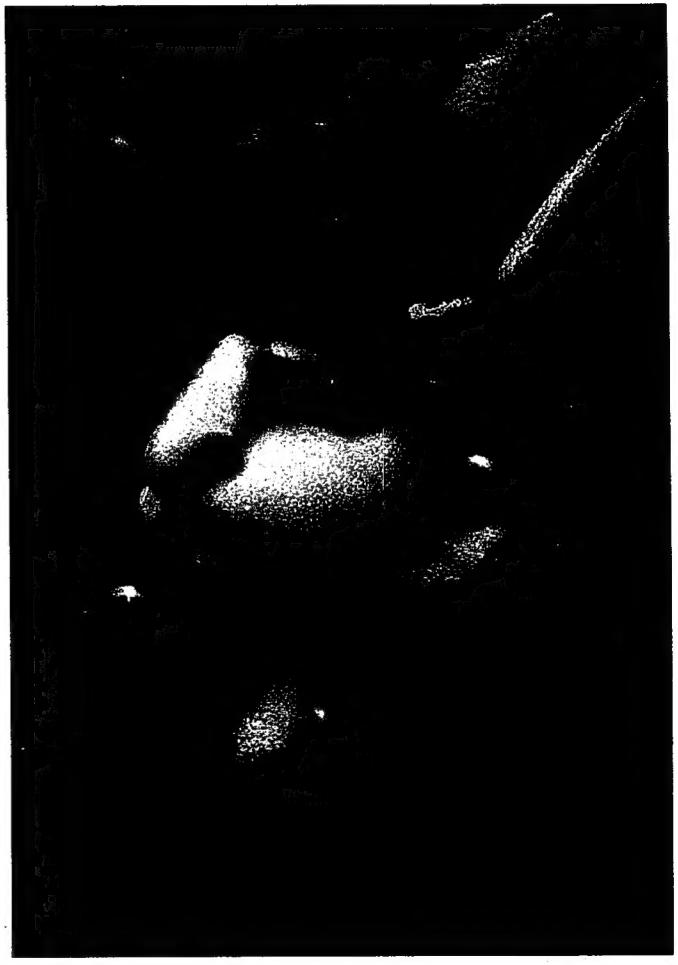

Volume 3 1994

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The *Wasatch Review International* is an annual literary journal dedicated to creative writing. Contributions from authors of any religion are welcome. Manuscripts (short stories, poetry, personal essays, dramas, book reviews) must in some way explore the Mormon culture. Our aim is fine literature—not religious politics—and manuscripts should not be written to prove or disprove Church policies or doctrines.

Manuscripts should not exceed eight thousand words. Manuscripts should be typed, double-spaced, and preferably be available on floppy disk (WordPerfect, MicroSoft Word, DOS text file). Each manuscript should be accompanied by a self-addressed stamped envelope. Send manuscripts to *Wasatch Review International*, P.O. Box 1017, Orem, UT 84059. For more information call (801) 371-0615. Those whose manuscripts are published will receive one contributor's copy.

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Announcing the Wasatch Review's Third Annual LDS Writers Conference

Date:	August 1995
Place:	Utah Valley State College, Orem, UT
Time:	9:00 a.m. - 5:30 p.m.
Cost:	$18.00 in advance, $23.00 at the door

To register, or for more information, write to WRI, Writers Conference, P.O. Box 1017, Orem, UT, 84059.

Last year's conference attendees were able to listen to and mingle with writers such as Leonard Arrington, Eleanor Knowles (senior editor at Deseret Book and author of *Howard W. Hunter*), Gerald Lund, and Susan Evans McCloud. In addition, authors were able to meet with representatives of the major Mormon publishers.

If last year's conference sounds appealing to you, then you won't want to miss this year's conference. There will only be room for 200 people so you'll want to register early. Come join us for this day reserved just for writers or for those who want to be writers.

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Letter from the Editor

Where Are the Mormon Writers?

Tory C. Anderson

OVER A DECADE AGO, DURING THE LAST WEEK OF AUGUST, I WALKED into an amphitheater-style classroom in the Tanner building and found a seat. It was the first day of class and I wasn't sure I was in the right place. Soon, however, the instructor entered and said that this class was American History 121 and that he was Michael Quinn. I had heard from a source which I cannot remember now that Michael Quinn was in trouble with the University for something he had written about Church history. I was not concerned with things like that at the time, but I remember I was mildly interested in what a man who was in trouble with the institution he worked for would be like. From the first day I found him unpretentious, warm, fair, and genuinely interested in American history. His interest was contagious and I have been enthusiastic about American history ever since. The class was large and he has no particular reason to remember me, but he can count me as one of his teaching successes.

Since that class I have casually followed Michael Quinn's life through newspaper stories, magazine articles, and lectures. Just recently I read a speech that he gave at Dixie College not too long after his excommuni-

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cation from the Church. As he began this speech he bore one of the strongest testimonies I have heard of the restored gospel, Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, the Godhead, and the present day leaders of the Church. Then he added something about the Mormon culture I found very profound:

> Although I've been excommunicated from the LDS church, I remain a Mormon in heritage, culture, and belief. I was born a seventh-generation Mormon, and remain so. Mormon culture—with all its strengths and weaknesses—is my culture. The Mormon people—with all their triumphs and shortcomings—are my people. Leaving aside matters of faith, I'm still a Mormon for the same reasons that secular Jews (even the atheists among them) are still Jewish. (*Sunstone*, June 1994, 67-68)

This stands out in my mind because for years I have been interested in the Mormon culture—interested in whether there really is a substantive Mormon culture. When I speak of searching for a Mormon culture, I speak of trying to find something similar to the Jewish culture. I am not an anthropologist who has studied the Jewish culture. I do not have any Jewish friends nor have I lived in a Jewish community. All I know of the Jewish culture comes from reading literature (mainly creative) written by Jews. This literature paints a picture of a culture that is fascinating, a culture rich in history and tradition, and, perhaps most importantly, a culture made up of extreme diversity.

Perhaps it is ironic, but in this literature, in spite of the diversity, I find a sense of community. For example, Chaim Potok's *The Chosen* deals with two Jewish boys, Danny and Reuben. Danny is a Hasidic Jew who dresses in the traditional way, complete with skull cap and long curly locks on each side of his face. Reuben is a modern Jew who dresses like other Americans but who is conscious of and loyal to his religion and heritage.

He desires to become a rabbi. The reader can see a considerable difference between the worlds of Danny and Reuben, but even so, both characters are Jewish—they just represent different neighborhoods in the Jewish community. Of course the characters involved in the story (and perhaps those involved in real life) don't see it so simply. To Danny and the other Hasidim, Reuben is "goyim," an impure Jew with whom association is not desirable. Although Reuben does not look down upon the Hasidim, he does resent being seen as inferior to them due to his different style of Jewish life.

In my view *The Chosen* is something of a masterpiece. What makes it a masterpiece, besides the author's skill as a writer and depth of understanding, is his exploration of the Jewish culture (centering on the schism between Danny's world and Reuben's world) without preaching his version of Jewish philosophy while using Danny and Reuben as his tools. Danny and Reuben are the end product of the story, not the means to a politico/religious ending favoring the goyim, the Hasidim, or neither. Potok approaches both characters as if he doesn't believe one of them could be more right or could have a better way of life than the other. To Potok, both ways of life exist and thus both deserve to be studied. And as an artist who wants to write a novel, Potok realizes that he must take the differences between the two philosophies of life and create a plot that helps the reader understand more fully both characters (not to choose one over the other) and do this in a beautiful way. Potok succeeds and creates a book that adds worlds of understanding to my experience, and he does it in a beautiful manner.

There are many books just as fine, just as beautiful, written by other Jewish authors. Obviously the Jewish culture is substantive enough to create such writers and such literature. I believe what makes the Jewish culture substantive enough to produce fine literature is that it is diverse

enough to create conflict among members of that culture while being cohesive enough to retain its unique identity.

If the literature that a culture produces is a valid measure of a culture's substance, depth and richness, then it appears that the Mormon culture does not compare to the Jewish culture. The majority of Mormon literature is barren of the conflict that explores the Mormon culture and devoid of true diversity. The majority of the literature suggests that although there are millions of Mormons on the earth, all of them can be represented by two individuals (one growing stronger in the Church and the other growing weaker). The depth, richness, and diversity in such literature is lacking, which makes the underlying culture look mediocre. It's true that each of the books written premier different characters in various settings, but most of the books I have read deal either with a character who overcomes great odds because of his faith in the gospel and loyalty to the Church, or with a character who finally finds peace when he comes to accept the truth of the gospel and the restored Church. No matter what gender, color of eyes and hair, race, or time period on earth, the lack of conflict and diversity produces pretty much the same story.

In spite of the literature it produces, I don't believe the Mormon culture is so shallow. The Jewish culture is built on its history. Mormons have a rich history too. Even though our history doesn't cover the thousands of years that the Jews' does, there are striking similarities (although some in miniature): belief in a living god and a savior, revelations, prophets, miracles, persecutions, exterminations, temples, exoduses, and loyalty to the faith even when threatened by sure death. But the big question is, what about diversity? Is this where the similarities end—the Jewish culture has it and the Mormon culture doesn't? Although the Mormons are yet a small, young culture, the diversity is there. Whether orthodox Mormons like it or not, all the splinter groups from the RLDS Church to the polygamous factions in southern Utah are products of the LDS culture.

The inactive family living around the corner and the nonmember family living in the middle of a Mormon neighborhood have much to do with the Mormon culture. However, it is the diversity produced by what we could term as the orthodox core of Mormons (the mainstream Mormons you find at Church each Sunday) that is the most interesting to me. At a distance, and even up close, mainstream Mormons look homogeneous. Even those living within the culture are often unaware of the diversity. Perhaps this is why most of the literature (especially creative literature) is vanilla in nature—the authors are incapable of seeing the full possibilities of each character's being.

So what does it take to write good Mormon literature? It takes a person who has grown up within the culture but who has the ability to step to the outside to observe—without loss of faith in the restored gospel or loss of love for the Mormon people—to see the beautiful human diversity that makes up the Mormon people. Unfortunately, this kind of person does not come around very often. This is because the person who can clearly see his own people is often rejected by those people as a rabblerouser, a troublemaker, a heretic. Ironically, the kind of people I am referring to are driven to study their culture by love and fascination for their people. These people are able to create art so beautiful that it crosses human boundaries and draws all honest hearts.

The Mormon culture has known only one such writer. Her name is Maureen Whipple. Maureen's masterpiece is *The Giant Joshua*. The novel was written nineteen years before my birth (1942), but it took me thirty-three years after my birth to discover it. I started the *Wasatch Review International* because of my inability to find creative LDS literature that explored our culture. What I did find was literature that was either propaganda for the Church or a reaction against the Church, neither of which is good literature. Both kinds of literature read like student newspapers with their many arguments for or against an idea but none of which have

any more depth or meaning than last year's fashions. But when
author with enough love and maturity and skill to explore each
of a culture as a human being, without succumbing to the tem
evaluate that character's point of view or way of life? Maureen
very thing. In The Giant Joshua, a novel written 52 years ago, Ma
did what has not been done since—she wrote a novel that can be profit
held up to Mormons and non-Mormons alike that says: "Here is the Mor-
mon culture. Here is a people worth your study. Here is a people who will stun you with their strengths, their weaknesses, both of which make up their worthiness; here is a people deserving of your love."

In *The Giant Joshua*, Maureen Whipple strips each character bare and we see their public and private parts. Maureen created LDS characters that transcend the good Mormon/bad Mormon stereotype. I never saw a single good or bad Mormon in the entire book, but whether it was Brigham Young, John D. Lee, Clory MacIntyre, Erastus Snow, or Abijah MacIntyre, I saw only human beings whose personal versions of Mormon beliefs caused them to interact with the world in a unique and fascinating way. Each character is three-dimensional enough for the reader to find reason to love and hate her or him. As I experienced each character's life I felt new dimensions to my own Mormonness form. These characters weren't used to preach for or against the Church; they were just individual Mormons whose diversity was set off by their sense of community.

Any character in *The Giant Joshua* would suffice as a good example of Maureen's ability to create a complete LDS character, but one of the best examples is Abijah MacIntyre. Maureen makes the difficult job of creating a three-dimensional LDS character harder when the first picture she paints of Abijah MacIntyre, one of the novel's major characters, is a picture of a joyless, self-righteous, lustful man. Distraught over the joviality of the members of the company he is guiding to St. George, Abijah has

toward a couple who have carried their sick child through
ilderness:

ing that Abijah couldn't understand was that although Eliza
rles, her husband, had for the entire month of the journey
en sleepless with worry over this, their first child, and Eliza herself
just out of her bed from having it, you might say, when they started,
and although between the two of them they had walked with that
child on a pillow for every step of the three hundred and fifty miles
over deserts and rivers and mountains, ice and snow and bitter sleet,
and now, clogging sand, although they had done all this, they still had
time to dally and joke. You would have thought they'd be sobered by
now, as become those whom the Lord chasteneth.

His self-righteousness comes naturally and without any seeming affectation. While introducing himself to John D. Lee (infamous for his role in the Mountain Meadow Massacre), he says, "I was President of the First Quorum of the Seventies in the Nineteenth Ward in the City, Brother Lee." And, on another occasion when the pioneers are singing while traveling, "Abijah smiled and lifted his thundering bass in song. In spite of her giddiness, Clory was a little soldier; and, of course, being married to him was going to make a lot of improvement in her."

Our sense of justice, fairness, and morality is offended when we learn that Abijah has taken for his third wife the girl he has raised for the past fifteen years (an unofficial foster daughter). She is only seventeen and Abijah has a son nearly that same age. It's true that the marriage wasn't Abijah's idea (it was suggested by Brigham Young), but we'd like to pretend that a man of Abijah's stature ("I was president of the First Quorum of the Seventy in the Nineteenth Ward in the City") didn't have such a strong sexual drive:

It was enough to have to raise her without having to
But at that thought and the sudden remembrance of her
and the scolding-locks of her black hair crisping on her soft
below her bob, a familiar compulsion gripped Abijah's loins. He
repressed it sternly as befitted a secret weakness. There was a time
and a place.

Later, while Abijah and Clory are out looking at some land together, what starts out as a fun, loving, tender moment, turns into what some would call rape when Abijah loses control of his strong sexual desire for Clory.

'Rub some on mine,' Clory said, and held out her hand to him. Brushing the flour over the small, calloused palm Abijah was unexpectedly conscious of how fragile she was, how lonely she must sometimes be in the long evenings in her wagon box listening to the coyote chorus.

Dropping the box, spilling the flour across the sand, he leaned over and kissed her.

'Clor-rinda, bairn,' he breathed, gritting his teeth, his nostrils flaring, 'Clor-rinda, Clor-rinda.'

Clory struggled up from under that embrace with a look in her eyes like a wild thing's startled wonder just before the instant of its flight. But Abijah was abruptly a man surrendering to a long want, and his lips were greedy.

The girl, drowned in his urgency, could only push futilely at his strength, turn her head away . . .

This is it, thought Clory; this is what it's all about. Where were all the stars Rolph had exploded in her heart? Where the ecstatic pother one read about in all the stories? Just Abijah suddenly like a man gone mad and her own wild alarm at the touch of his hot flesh. This, she thought, is what they meant by obedience . . .

[illegible] feels bad that he was so rough with her on their first [illegible] desire for her is not abated nor is his ability to control it [illegible]. His relations with Clory become the talk of the camp.

Erastus dreaded the job before him. Abijah was one of this own High Council, one of his right-hand men. He looked at the earnest bearded faces of his High Priests—he had called together all the Melchizedek quorum, to which Abijah belonged—and wondered how to begin. 'Ptsahh' . . .

'If our women are willing to consecrate their lives to the duty of motherhood, to this end sacrificing earthly pleasures . . . the least a man can do is' . . . ptsahh . . . 'be temperate in his habits.'

(He regretted the slow red creeping up Abijah's cheeks.) . . .

Erastus walked home with his arm in a brotherly link with Abijah's.

'Women are . . . *women*, Brother Mac: any kind of' . . . ptsahh! . . . 'favoritism may cause backbiting and evil speaking . . . besides, you've got three wives, man! You're acting like Thompson's colt who swum the river to get a drink!'

Abijah was like a small boy caught stealing apples, but stubborn, too—he'd be damned if anybody 'ud stop him as long as the apples were sweet to his palate! But walking to Clory's wagon box that night, darting defiant glances right and left at the innocent sagebrush, he was nevertheless wondering uneasily if anything he enjoyed so much as sleeping with Clory could be right. He resented women, anyway, because he thought in his heart they were the one means of keeping him from being absolutely pure . . . His favorite sermon was on the theory that behind every sin man ever committed you could find a woman . . .

As Abijah continues toward Clory's tent, fostering his bad attitude, Maureen shows us Clory, who, instead of being the victim or the heroine

most authors would be tempted to create, shows us an LDS girl who, although not happy with the way things are going, is dealing with it.

> Clory . . . wanted to be a good wife to Abijah . . . If only he'd not be so scary and stern . . . maybe she was bad for thinking anything so sacred might also be fun . . . but if only he'd play a little . . . When Abijah stamped over to the bed, she raised herself up on one elbow and twinkled at him.
>
> 'Well!' she cried, the little flute notes in her voice,'Well, my dear! I've put on the pink satin sheets for us tonight!'
>
> Abijah merely glowered at her and went on struggling with his boots. She looked a good pattern to make a wife out of, but even the young curve of her breast couldn't compensate him for the fact that now she was making fun of him. He ground his teeth. She was like a drug in his veins, and he hated her.

If Maureen were a lesser writer, the quotes above would clearly show that she is creating Abijah to be the villain of the novel, the character she will manipulate in order to manipulate us to hate him, to want to burn him in effigy. I had no love for Abijah at this point in the story. I must also admit that I was worried that *The Giant Joshua* was going to turn out to be a novel whose author had a chip on her shoulder against the Church, which would make it a bad novel (as bad as a novel written to promote the Church). What gave me hope, however, was that Maureen, up to this point, had given me insight to where Abijah was coming from. He wasn't nasty and mean just to be nasty and mean; he was a man who had his own concept of what it was like to be a saint (something he wanted very much to be) and he was fully aware that a saint he wasn't.

As the novel continues, Clory actually begins to love Abijah, a thought some may find repulsive considering the view we get of him at the beginning of the book. But through development of his character Maureen

shows us how this love could be. There is no sudden insight, no revelation about his life that changes the way we see him, Maureen just shows us so much of him that we see parts of him that we can love as much as we hate the parts of him that we hate. For example:

> The air moved with a faint, wayward sweetness as if it had brushed some far-off field of wildflowers. And Clory noticed as she had done before that the evenings seemed to bring windless currents in layers, cooling her cheek here, and a block farther on growing imperceptibly warm again.
>
> Abijah filled his lungs and emptied them with a long, ecstatic sigh.
>
> 'Aigh, what a nicht! Tae think when I was ca'ed tae this countr-ry I said I wasna gaen! I must hae been daft!'

What Maureen does here is subtle and it is the subtlety that makes it effective and good writing. As self-righteous and chauvinistic as Abijah is, it is hard to hate a man who can sense the beauty of an evening as Abijah does here. And she shows us more:

> 'Aye, it's a nicht for singing,' he cried. 'I remember . . .'
>
> Clory knew what he remembered. The old days on the ranch at Cottonwood before he had taken other wives and polygamy had fermented his household, simple days of harmony and peace when evening 'sings' were as natural as laughter. Scotch dances in the South Fort with the frolic of the fiddle and the wild, haunting skirling of the bagpipes. . . .
>
> By the time the moon came up they were all singing with such an abandon of pleasure it was half pain. Clory's fingers nimble on the dulcimer. Rollicking melodies that tapped the foot and swung the shoulder.

Free's tenor took on warmth and roundness, 'Sheba's neighing softened, the boys' young voices blended, a chorus of voices, united, freed, pouring out grief and fear and hope to the stars.

When the last song had washed away pretense and resentment, Abijah bowed his head quite simply.

'. . . For my soul delighteth in the song of the heart; yea, the song of the righteous is a prayer unto me, and it shall be answered with a blessing upon their heads.' And then, almost as an afterthought:

'. . . Be ye kind to another, and tender-hearted.'

Again, in spite of himself, I see something convincingly good in Abijah. There is no self-righteousness or piousness in Abijah's prayer; it's pure responsiveness to the spirit of God. Maureen doesn't just show Abijah at his ugly times or his beautiful times, she shows him at the in-between times that most of us experience throughout the majority of our lives, the times when we are neither good nor bad, but are trying or at least wanting to be good. At this point, Clorinda, in the more fulfilling stages of pregnancy, is angry at Abijah for punishing Free (his 17-year-old son) so harshly. Abijah, hurt that she is angry, wants to speak to her and help her understand how much he loves his son and her:

Abijah stared at her with weary exasperation. As usual, he dwarfed the dugout, but she thought she had never seen his vitality so dimmed. His eyes, red-rimmed from sleeplessness, were tired and sick with despair. Even the wave she had watched him wet and press in his hair of a morning was flattened and dull.

She observed him with cool detachment as he hunted for the right words to say to her. One hand fumbled with the buttons of his vest . . . and the skin across his knuckles was rough and chapped. He'd had to give up his browned flour lately.

'Come in to breakfast, Clorinda Agathy,' he pleaded patiently. 'Ye're only actin' fulish. Don't you think punishin' him touched my

tender spot, too? But he maun be humbled back to the Lord. I hae longed many times to unbosom my feelin's to ye, Clorinda Agathy, but . . .'

Her ankles were still pretty, anyway. She lifted her skirts, her eyes fixed innocently on his face, so that he could see her swinging pretty feet, toes pink, nails like white seashells. There was a devil in her. She wouldn't have admitted the ankle-showing was anything but an accident for worlds. She looked at him with wide-eyed, ingenuous innocence while she tempted him with the ankles swung back and forth. And reflected that she'd dare him to get his passions aroused. She saw by the way he gritted his teeth that he was fully aware of what she was doing.

'Eneuch!' he cried. 'Ye're shameless!'

He clenched his fists and started toward her, but then she backed away from him, eyes wide, knocking over the chair.

'Don't touch me! Don't dare touch me! I'll run away!'

He was bewildered

'But Clorinda Agathy, I'm your husband. I've only been waiting . . .'

Maureen shows Abijah as a man. A good man who wants to be a good husband, who wants his wife to be a good wife, who wants to have a good marriage, who wants to have a good life. But in spite of his desire to do good he is stymied by his own physical weakness, his philosophical weakness, and by the weakness of those he loves. Much to her credit as a writer, Maureen shows Abijah as a man who, in spite of his weaknesses, is good.

Although Abijah's and Clory's weaknesses make their marriage difficult, love does bloom and grow there. After Kissy is born (Clory's first child), Abijah has to travel to a distant town on business and Clory and Kissy come along. On this journey they start to develop a closeness they hadn't experienced before:

> Abijah could not resist the comfort of a good meal, the release from pressure, Clory's constant nearness, her determination to please, and, with the stimulation of change, the flashing into life of her old gay spirit; he thawed visibly and began to talk of little things, odds and ends of gossip. It seemed good to hear his laugh again. With the passing of the long, slow miles they drew together as they had not done for more than a year.

Abijah is self-righteous throughout the entire book, but Maureen, creating a whole character, shows us moments of doubt or maybe it is wisdom. On the return journey they meet Orson Pratt, Jr., one of the original settlers of St. George, but who is now an apostate (he became unsure about Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon). Orson is sick and struggling on foot across the desert and Abijah offers him a ride.

> Abijah silently handed him his own canteen and Orson took a long, shuddering pull of the fresh water. Abijah waited a moment and reached behind in the grub-box for one of the cakes. Orson stared at it on Abijah's outstretched palm. 'Thanks,' he muttered, and began to eat it slowly.
>
> 'I been grabbling potatoes in Cedar Fort,' he said, chewing; 'fifteen cents apiece for spuds no bigger'n a hen's egg. My God Brother Mac, my kids are starving! I seen their empty bellies swell!'
>
> His mouth twisted suddenly and his Adam's apple shot upward. Kissy on her mother's lap stared in fascination.
>
> 'But I won't take any help from Erastus Snow! I'll die first!' His bloodshot eyes narrowed fiercely. 'You people don't care if a man rolls in a manure pile as long as he's one of you!'
>
> Clory, her heart going out to him, held her breath for fear Abijah's temper would lash out. But Abijah merely sat and stared thoughtfully.

> When Orson went to go, Abijah filled his canteen with fresh water, gave him the gunny sack from his own canteen to wrap his feet in, divided the cakes with him.
>
> As they drove on, Abijah still did not speak, but there was perplexity in the sunken fires of his eyes.
>
> 'Ech,' he said deep in his chest, 'life's an ugsome circle. A mon hates ye, and ye hate the next mon because the first one hated ye . . .'
>
> Clory did not believe her own ears. Could Abijah be growing old, that he would admit a doubt of himself or his place in the universe?

What makes Abijah so fascinating to me is that Maureen was able to create in him a "human" man (a full member of the human race in general) and a "Mormon" man (a man so Mormon that his world takes on tones that non-Mormons will never see). If Maureen had not seen Abijah as a man, a member of the human race, the novel would not be worth reading. And yet it is Abijah as a Mormon man that gives the book its edge. Again and again we see how Abijah's "Mormonness" makes him beautiful like God, and then Maureen will show us where his attempts to become like God become his own stumbling block.

A while after Orson leaves the wagon, the wagon turns over. After Abijah and Clory crawl out from under that wagon they find Kissy "laying where she had fallen, white as a dead child."

> Abijah was like a madman. 'Help me, Mother,' he said, holding the child up, putting his ear against her chest, fanning her face. Not until after did Clory remember he had called her 'Mother.' 'I haven't any il,' he said, 'but' . . . He had always prayed as if God were there beside him, but now, placing his hands upon Kissy's head, he pleaded with such desperate eloquence that Clory leaned to kiss the horny knuckles. At that moment, with the blood of his wound, the dust of the accident, the sweat of his terror still upon him, stripping him of overlaid emotions, stripping him to the core, she loved him. All her life

> laid emotions, stripping him to the core, she loved him. All her life there would be instants, lost in memory, when the authentic passion for Free returned, when the glow, the warmth, even a breath of the old rapture brushed her and was gone like the falling of a leaf. But she could live with Abijah. She knew it now. She saw beneath the shell, and with what she saw, she could fashion a life. Even in the agony of suspense, even watching the stillness of that little body she adored beyond hope of heaven, something within her rose and sang.
>
> Abijah stopped speaking; the sun poured down; a column of red ants portaged across one of the maroon water gullies. They waited. And then there was the flutter of movement in the throat. They waited, and Kissy opened her eyes and began to cry.

Later in the novel, Kissy does die. Abijah is on a mission in England when this happens. Kissy's death is slow and agonizing, and it nearly destroys Clory to watch. Weeks after Kissy's death, Clory gets a letter from Abijah. She is excited because this is the first letter that is addressed to her personally and not to all the wives. Her happiness lasts only until she opens the letter and reads:

> As to the death of our children, you know that Death continues his work, and will till he reaches the doom of us all; I hope the fatal hour will not find you unprepared. I want to ask you if you pray in your families and with your children. Do you teach them to pray? This trouble is God's judgment on you, Clorinda Agatha.

Here Abijah is a man serving God on a mission, spiritual adrenaline running through his veins, and because of it he is unable to see the tragedy of the death of a child, unable to see the pain and innocence of a mother. And yet when he comes home and the spiritual adrenaline subsides a little he is able to repent:

> 'Clor-rinda,' he murmured, holding her close, his voice hoarsening, 'Clor-rinda, I hae wanted to tell ye for a long time aboot the letter. I was wrang to tell ye Kissy's death was a punishment. It . . .'
>
> Then, indeed, she lifted her head to stare at him. Stared in the dim firelight until he dropped his eyes. Could it be that Abijah was humbling himself? All her heart rushed out in a flood of tenderness for him—a child who'd confessed and was sorry.

The most difficult part of any kind of literature is the ending. So many would-be fine stories are ruined by a happy ending. It is not that happy is bad, but that the "happy" created does not ring true. Then there are the bitter endings that seem to say nothing more than that life can be bitter (as if they are telling you something new). Long before I got to the end I was wondering what Maureen was going to do to avoid the meaningless happy or bitter ending. It was clear that the ending would have to deal with who is Abijah? By the end of the novel, what has Maureen created in him? There is considerable variance of opinion about what Maureen does with Abijah. Some think the ending is the only weakness in the book. It isn't hard to understand why some feel this way for, to put it briefly, Abijah is called to be the Logan Temple president, but, because of the laws and persecutions against polygamy, he is instructed to bring only one of his wives with him. Because Willie, the second wife had died, the contest is between Bathsheba, the first wife, and Clory. Abijah takes neither, opting instead to marry a young fourth wife who is more likely to bear him more children (Bathsheba's childbearing years are over and Clory can no longer carry a child to term but is, nonetheless, pregnant again). He more or less abandons Bathsheba and Clory and starts a new life in Logan. Maureen gives us no reason to forgive Abijah for this. In fact, because of the sentiment expressed by all who know Clory, Maureen gives us reason to detest Abijah for this act of betrayal, this abdication to

lust. But even so, Maureen again shows Abijah as being more human being than villain.

> But when Abijah came to tell her good-bye she was collected again, armored in pride, going casually about the business of preparing for bed, and when he stooped under the lintel the glance she managed to fling him was indifferent.
>
> Abijah was at a loss . . . Curse a fyllie, she had always left him at a loss. He had thought of himself as going off in a blaze of glory, kissing Clor-rinda's tears, this hurts me more than it does you, but the work in Logan will be hard and you need a rest, I shall think of you down here as resting, a few sentimental reveries over the past, aigh, the past, the past, we've had a good time, my lass, but what will be, will be, and we maun think of us all as meeting on the Other Side . . .
>
> Instead, she was actually flippant. She made him feel like a foolish boy . . . And then unexpectedly all their years together did overwhelm him. His voice trembled, he forgot everything except her nearness, and went to take her in his arms, but Clory was too quick for him.
>
> She held out a polite hand, and her smile in the shadows of the lamp was hard and bright.
>
> 'Good-bye!' Flippancy to cover up hurt, never to let him know. 'Good-bye while you're handy!'

Here Maureen shows us a little of both sides of Abijah—the side we detest ("He thought of himself as going off in a blaze of glory . . .") and the side we love ("And then unexpectedly all their years together did overwhelm him"). In the end, Abijah certainly is no hero, but, as shocking as his abandoning Bathsheba and Clory is, he is no villain either. He is a man struggling to live a religion that asks so much of him (much more than it does today) and he is a man struggling with human weaknesses

made more complex by that religion. (Bathsheba would have been his only wife had he not been asked by Brigham Young to take a second and then a third wife. His fourth wife was entirely his own decision, with the encouragement of the bride.)

So what is Abijah in the end? He is simply a Mormon man struggling with himself, his religion, and the world in a way so personal that no other man will ever quite struggle in the same way. Abijah is part of the Mormon community but he does not represent the Mormon community. Although the quotes in this essay deal with Abijah, *The Giant Joshua* is full of individual characters so truly diverse that it makes you wonder and rejoice when you see them all together in the tabernacle singing hymns and sharing testimonies and giving their lives for the community of God.

The Giant Joshua received glowing national reviews. It was placed in the top ten on the nation's bestseller list. In one poll Maureen's popularity ranked above Ernest Hemingway's. After I read the book, there was no question in my mind as to why it received such accolades. I've brought this fact up with popular Mormon authors. Their response has been that they have no desire to be published nationally, that they are proud to write books solely for Mormons. Ironically, I find Maureen's book far more "Mormon" than their books. I think non-Mormons do too. A reviewer in the *New York Times* said *The Giant Joshua* was "rich, robust, oddly exciting," and that it "brings Mormons as close to home to the reader as they have ever been. They are not only likable, but they have a certain magnificence which fully explains their history." I am not saying that Mormon authors should write to get glowing national reviews. I'm saying that books that are truly Mormon, that effectively explore the diversity and wonder of our culture, and are written with enough skill will draw any heart that seeks for the beauty and experience that can be found in any culture—such as I have found in the Jewish culture—whether or not the reader is a part of that culture. I, as a member of the Mormon

culture, seek for such books because I know the Mormon culture is much more than what the popular Mormon novels show. Maureen Whipple's *The Giant Joshua*, in my opinion, speaks more for the Mormon culture than all the popular LDS books combined. I'm enthusiastically awaiting for another author to do us justice again.

Ringing Up Zero

Tryn Paxton

I ONLY WENT SO I COULD BE ALONE WITH MY DAD. THE TWO OF US HAD had most of our best talks in the car, inside a bubble of steel and glass where conversation is natural, intimate, confidential. That afternoon as we sped along Interstate 15, traveling from our house in Escondido toward San Diego, our talk centered on the books we were each reading.

Books are a kind of bond between my father and me, a secret he has whispered in my ear. When I was young we spent hours reading together in his den. On Sunday afternoons we would settle down on his couch, and he would read to me from *The Wizard of Oz*, *Through the Looking Glass*, or *Pippi Longstocking*. When I was old enough to write my name, Dad took me to the public library to get a library card. When I was older he often left books or articles on my desk for me to read. When I was thirteen, I discovered *The Scarlet Letter* on the shelf in the school library. I had heard somewhere that this book was about immorality, and immorality (that favorite topic of MIA teachers and bishops) was just what most

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interested my adolescent mind. Dad noticed me reading the book and questioned me about it. I think he was curious to know how much I understood. If he was amused by my answers, he didn't show it.

Now, at eighteen, I still enjoyed discussing books with my dad. I had been reading *The Grapes of Wrath* that summer, and while Dad and I discussed Steinbeck, the thirty miles passed quickly beneath our speeding car and we soon pulled into the parking lot of the Bishop's Storehouse. I had been to the Bishop's Storehouse before, but only for service projects. Dad had been here many times over the past few months and knew the routine. He greeted Brother Stay, the store manager, and the two of them chatted for a few minutes. Brother Stay served in our ward bishopric and had recently been hired to manage the Bishop's Storehouse. He was a short man, about my height, with gray hair that he combed straight back so that it formed a ledge over his forehead. His voice was kind and professional. I had dated his son Roger several times that summer. While Dad talked to Brother Stay, I stood close by, wiggling my toes in and out of my summer thongs and wondering if Roger knew my family received food from the Church welfare system.

Inside, the storehouse looked like any other small grocery store. The food was arranged neatly on shelves, and there were large refrigerated cabinets with glass doors for the milk and frozen products. But there was a difference: no cash registers.

Brother Stay already had the food ready for us. There were boxes of oranges, apples, and bananas; two large bags of potatoes; another box with carrots, lettuce, and onions; fourteen cartons of milk; packaged hamburger; sacks of flour and sugar and raisins; a box full of canned goods. I helped Dad carry the food to our car and load it in the trunk. There was so much we had to put some of it in the back seat. Food to feed a family of nine for two weeks amounted to quite a few trips back and

forth between the storehouse and our car. When we were done, Dad shook hands with Brother Stay and thanked him.

On the drive home, Dad and I didn't talk much. After several miles of silence, he said, "How did that make you feel—going there, I mean?" I glanced over at him, wanting to see the expression on his face, wanting to see the light blue eyes beneath the reddish-blond eyelashes. But Dad was looking straight ahead at the road.

I looked out my side window and examined a housing development under construction that we were passing. I knew Dad would wait for me to think before I answered him. My conversations with him are always filled with long pauses. Dad never hurries, especially in conversations, and his pauses always make me feel that his words are carefully chosen, deliberate, accurate. So now he waited patiently for me to speak, while I searched my mind for the name of the emotion I was feeling. There was embarrassment, shame almost, and anger too, the kind that has no direction, no object. Most of all, there was guilt for not feeling gratitude, for wanting to take the food that fellow saints had worked and sacrificed to provide for us and leave it right there on the side of Interstate 15. I wanted to tell Dad these things, to know if he felt them too. I wanted to tell him that I didn't blame him, that he had not failed us. But at the time I couldn't find the words. "Sad," I finally said. "It made me feel sad." Dad nodded.

It was November of my freshman year at BYU that my parents called to tell me my dad had lost his job as a computer systems analyst for a large company in San Diego. I was concerned, but not overly anxious. Dad had been out of work before and had managed to find another job. Besides, life was too beautiful and exciting just then for anything to dampen my spirits. I had entered the university and found a world that exactly suited me—a world of books and ideas, of midnight talks with friends, of profes-

sors who were enthusiastic about their subject matter and interested in their students, of dating, of symphonies and plays, of Church callings, of having my own checkbook. And at seventeen I was experiencing my first autumn. My world had been painted over in rich colors, and I stood before it, breathtaken. Dad's losing his job could not affect my new world: during high school I had taught piano lessons after school and applied for scholarships so that I could afford to come to BYU without burdening my parents with the expense.

When I went home for Christmas that first year, nothing seemed much different. Mom, always prepared and unbelievably organized, had done the Christmas shopping before my dad learned that he was losing his job. We had plenty of presents, a house full of relatives, good food, and that familiar feeling of family strength and love that Christmas always brings for me. The only troubling moment of that Christmas vacation was the day Mom and I went out to lunch at our favorite taco stand. We chatted over our usual beef tostadas.

"I'm worried about him," Mom said. "He doesn't seem interested in sending out resumes or going to interviews." Her eyes seemed foreign to me. There was fear in them. "He's content to sit in his den and read or work in the garden or do things with the kids. I can understand how he feels, but a family needs money to survive."

Sometime after Christmas, when I had gone back to BYU, the bishop called my parents into his office and urged them to accept food from the Church welfare system. That way, he reasoned with them, they could use their reduced income to make house payments and pay utility bills. My parents, by then desperate to make ends meet, reluctantly agreed.

It wasn't until I came home for the summer that I began to sense the tension and strain that had been building in my family while I had been away at school. Dad hadn't found work in his field, but a man in our ward

offered him a job as an electrician's assistant. He came home exhausted and sunburned every night.

My mother had heard President Benson's message "To Mothers in Zion," delivered in February of that year: "Sometimes we hear of husbands who, because of economic conditions, have lost their jobs and expect their wives to go out of the home and work even though the husband is still capable of providing for his family. In these cases, we urge the husband to do all in his power to allow his wife to remain in the home caring for the children while he continues to provide for his family the best he can, even though the job he is able to secure may not be ideal and family budgeting will have to be tighter."

Even though she has a college degree and a teacher's certification, Mom was determined that as long as she had young children, she would not get a job outside her home. Instead she took in other people's children to babysit, somehow managing to still do everything she had done before. When I read of Steinbeck's Ma Joad in the *Grapes of Wrath* I saw a portrait of my mother in his words:

> Her full face was not soft; it was controlled, kindly. Her hazel eyes seemed to have experienced all possible tragedy and to have mounted pain and suffering like steps into a high calm and a superhuman understanding. She seemed to know, to accept, to welcome her position, the citadel of the family, the strong place that could not be taken. And since old Tom and the children could not know hurt or fear unless she acknowledged hurt and fear, she had practiced denying them in herself. And since, when a joyful thing happened, they looked to see whether joy was on her, it was her habit to build up laughter out of inadequate materials. But better than joy was calm. Imperturbability could be depended upon. And from her great and humble position in the family she had taken dignity and a clean, calm beauty. From her position as healer, her hands had grown sure and

> cool and quiet; from her position as arbiter she had become as remote and faultless in judgment as a goddess. She seemed to know that if she swayed the family shook, and if she ever really deeply wavered or despaired the family would fall, the family will to function would be gone.

Mom adopted a complete, undoubting faith during those months. She believed that with enough prayers and fasting and righteous living, God would ultimately bless us. Her husband *would* find a job. My family fasted every Sunday, and while I was at school I fasted too. Mom often reminded us that our father had always been a completely honest tithe payer; the Lord could not shut the windows of heaven to us. The Lord is bound when we do what he says, Mom told us.

Like Mom, I believed the promises of the scriptures:

"Ask and it shall be given you."

"Whatsoever thing ye shall ask in faith, believing that ye shall receive in the name of Christ, ye shall receive it."

"Yea, I know that God will give liberally to him that asketh. Yea, my god will give me, if I ask not amiss."

"Behold, I say unto you that whoso believeth in Christ, doubting nothing, whatsoever he shall ask the Father in the name of Christ it shall be granted him; and this promise is unto all, even unto the ends of the earth."

The hard part is learning what to ask for.

"And please help Dale to find a good job, one that will provide for the needs of the family." I had known those words were coming, as they came every night, except when Dad prayed. Before each family prayer, Mom reminded us to pray for our father. To her these prayers were genuine, insistent. She was like the importunate widow, wearying the unjust judge with her pleas. To me the words had become vain repetitions. That night

when Mom prayed I wanted to scream, "Stop saying that!" when she came to the unwavering petition. I wanted to shock her into seeing, "Stop throwing your frustrations in his face and calling it faith." But I didn't scream. I listened to Mom finish her prayer, listened to her pray for each of her children and ask God to help us be sensitive to one another's needs and to send his spirit to be in our home. I was wearing shorts that night, and the raised floral design on the linoleum was imprinting itself on my knees. Mom finished her prayer. I didn't say amen.

That was two summers ago. Now my dad works for an hourly rate at a small office supply store. For a few months he worked for a company in Los Angeles, living there during the week and coming home on weekends. But that was only a short-term job, and he hated being away from his family all week. Sometimes Dad puts on the navy blue suit, white shirt, and tie that are recommended attire according to his book *Dress for Success* and goes to a job interview. He usually comes home very quiet and tired and says something about losing touch with the computer world. When my mom urges him to go back to school, he says nothing.

My mom babysits eleven children during the day, and our whole house looks like a nursery. There is a crib in every room, even my dad's den. Mom loves the children she watches and they love her. She has been able to save some money to help my three teenage brothers on their upcoming missions, and she has even been able to do some missionary work among the parents of the children she babysits. She is proud that there are no debts and that our family is no longer on Church welfare. "We haven't lost our home," she reminds us, "and we have never gone hungry." But Mom is tired most of the time, and sometimes she loses all the feeling in her right arm. When I talk to her on the phone she sounds weary, and sometimes I sense that far back, behind the strength, there is fear.

The morning before I left to come back to BYU at the end of last summer, I drove my dad to work. I drove him partly so I could use his car that

day and partly because I wanted some time to chat with him before I left. I dropped him off in Rancho Santa Fe where he was doing some electrical work, and then, since the ocean is only a ten-minute drive from there, I headed toward Del Mar Beach. I parked the car on a side street and walked down onto the sand. It was about seven-thirty in the morning and everything looked gray; the sand, the water, the sky, the undersides of the seagulls' wings all blended together. The only splotches of color were the sweatsuits of the joggers who occasionally passed me. I took off my shoes and dug my feet into the sand. I sat and listened to the waves and thought about my vacation, my summer job, my family, and my plans for the coming semester. Then, like a line running across the bottom of the television screen during a program, a sentence came: Ask Dad for a blessing. Suddenly I felt restless, too restless for the sound of the waves and the gray morning. I put on my shoes and went home.

Dad gave me the blessing early the next morning before my ride back to Utah arrived to pick me up. I sat in the rust-colored armchair next to the fireplace in the semi-darkness of the living room. Dad's hands were large and heavy on my head. The words came slowly, with long pauses between sentences. When I was younger my brothers and I spent long summer days boogie-boarding at the beach. We would paddle the sturdy styrofoam boards out where the waves first begin to swell. Positioning ourselves so that we faced the shore, we would grip tightly to the sides of the boogie-boards and concentrate on the motion of the water beneath us. At just the right moment we would become part of the motion of the wave, feeling it break over our bodies and rush toward the shore, pushing us with it. We considered the best waves to be the ones we could ride all the way in until the sand washed over our legs. That morning as Dad blessed me, the words moved inside me, swelling and then breaking, sending a rush of joy through my body. I heard my mother sniffling softly from

across the room. She seemed far away. Dad finished the blessing and we hugged. He hadn't shaved yet and his cheek scratched against mine.

Last semester a friend invited me to see a movie production of *Death of a Salesman*. Dustin Hoffman played Willy, an exhausted man, sinking deeper and deeper into despondency, struggling to maintain his dignity and manhood and sanity. After the movie my friend walked me home. It was the last day of November, a transition between seasons. It had snowed the weekend before, but most of the snow had melted. Only patches remained to cover the matted autumn leaves on the ground. I fastened the top button of my coat and searched in my pockets for gloves. My friend was telling me about a high school play he had acted in. I was thinking about Willy asking, "Does it take more guts to stand here the rest of my life ringing up a zero?" I watched the ground and imagined that the leaves were soggy, oversized cornflakes that someone had covered with too much sugar. Silently, I began to cry. My friend stopped talking about his high school play and offered me his handkerchief. Neither of us spoke for the rest of the walk home. I don't blame him for not knowing what to say or how to help.

Ordination Day

The dark blue suit was new,
and huge, to give me room
to move and to grow into.
It smelled like starched cologne
and followed stiffly through
the motions of reverence
it would be trained to do.

Sitting in a chair
grilled by Grandpa on the Holy
Ghost, I grinned like a fool, waiting
for those warm and heavy hands
as my sisters whispered; would God be angry
because I didn't wear my shoes
since it was just my family?

My dad could not resist just one last joke
about my name as they closed in on me,
a cloak of slacks and jeans and manly scent
that crushed me with responsibility and
reminded me of my promises and name,
the blessing and the power that were to be,
of steps that I would take to greater things.

—*Joel Baldwin*

Joel, a 1994 graduate of Brigham Young University, currently lives in Orem, UT, and works at National Applied Computer Technologies as a technical writer.

Leaving the Farm

Myrna Marler

WHEN EVE AND BUD ELOPED IN THE SUMMER OF 1956, BUD'S FATHER told them he would annul their marriage unless they followed his orders. "You can live on my summer estate in Hawaii. I need a groundsman and housekeeper, someone to look after the place. I'll even pay you. But," he added, and to Eve's way of thinking, it was a big but, "there will be no babies until you can support them yourselves."

At these edicts, Eve and Bud had moved their heads up and down in unison like silent marionettes. What was the loss of a little autonomy in exchange for life in paradise? True, the estate was a small banana and papaya farm in the back woods of Punaluu, and they would be isolated

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Myrna, her husband, and their seven boys have lived and worked at BYU Hawaii for the past seventeen years. Myrna finished her undergraduate work at BYU Hawaii in 1986. Myrna has been teaching freshman composition, library and research writing, survey of literature, and creative writing classes at BYU Hawaii as a special instructor ever since, as well as working part-time as an academic advisor for the Division of Language, Literature & Communications. Having recently completed her master's degree in American Studies, she is now close to finishing the coursework for a Ph.D in the same field at the University of Hawaii.

from civilization as they knew it. True, groundsman meant weed puller and lawn mower, and housekeeper meant dishwasher and furniture duster. They knew that, but they were teenagers. Bud's father had the law on his side. He could dissolve their new union any time. He controlled the checkbook, he could call the tune, and Eve and Bud would dance his jig.

Bud's father was a handsome man, self-assured, and used to having his own way. And Bud, in fact, being his youngest son, practically worshipped him. The man was the matchstick magnate of the world, the first to see the future and diversify into disposable lighters. So instead of being burned when matchstick sales fell as electric stoves took over gas ranges, and heating oil replaced fireplaces, his business had boomed. Indeed, his successes were legend. In the face of such authority, young Bud was not one to quibble over details. His father had nodded his great silver head and repeated his decree one more time before exiting to disappear again to his home on the other side of the world. He had taken them to the tiny plantation in Hawaii, established them on the estate, showed them where the dishrags and hedge clippers were, then stood at the door to utter a final word of caution. "Remember," he intoned, "No babies." He paused for a moment as if to reconsider that rather impregnable statement, then added, "Of course, you can decide for yourselves. But as far as I'm concerned, if the rabbit dies, your goose will be cooked."

"Ha, Ha, very funny," Eve didn't say.

"Dad," Bud said, "We know all about birth control."

Bud's father frowned as if they had no business knowing how to make babies, let alone prevent them. Further, Eve suspected that her father-in-law's birth control method of choice would have been abstinence, a method that required self-control, a quality he much admired, and one that didn't require a knowledge of esoteric chemical barriers or excursions into the commercial world. But his hat and umbrella were in his hand, a

white limousine was poised in the driveway, and it was time to say goodbye. "You kids keep in touch now," he said. "Don't call just because you want something."

Bud gave him a pained expression. Eve knew he didn't really want his father to leave at all. Bud would be happy if his father moved into the guest room full-time and directed his conflagrations from there. He knew that his rich and powerful father loved him and liked basking in the light of increased self-esteem whenever he got the chance to be near his father. And Bud liked hoarding the little nuggets his father dropped about his business affairs and his future plans for expansion. His father had never actually said so, but he hinted often enough that if Bud played his cards right, a nice place in the business might well open up for him some day. Eve had observed that Bud's father wasn't one to hand out easy promises like bits of candy on a silver plate. Rather, he seemed to be of the old school, the one which believed candy to children should be preceded by their good deeds. In fact, Eve was often to remark to herself over the next two years, his willingness to settle them both on a small tropical farm, then leave them with nothing much more to worry about than coming in out of the rain was most out of character.

Bud loved the place from the beginning. The banana and papaya groves stretched out behind the big house, the trees lined up in neat rows, bulging with fruit. Bud liked digging around in the red dirt, mulching, and raking and fertilizing, like a child turned loose in the ultimate sandbox. He'd always had an affinity for growing things, having raised his own corn and peas since he was eight, and Hawaii was perfect for him because, as Eve sourly noted, everything, even mold and various fungi, grew there whether it was supposed to or not. On one of his trips to town in the pickup to unload extra fruit at the farmers' market, Bud had bought himself a German Shepherd and named it King—after his father, Eve supposed. Before long, the dog followed him everywhere. Bud took to

wearing a straw hat to keep the sun off his head, and a red bandanna to wipe away his perspiration. In the evening, when the breezes finally beat back the heat of the day, he'd walk up to the path to the house where Eve stood waiting. The hat would be in his hand and the sweat-drenched bandanna wrapped around his forehead. Dust had streaked into mud on his damp skin smearing his bright young face. Seeing her, he would wave. The dog would jump and bark. "I love gardening!" Bud would shout, and the roosters and peacocks would scatter at the sudden sound of their voices. Normally, the only sounds Eve heard during the day were the broken songs of mynah birds, the clucking of chickens, the rattle and whisper of coconut fronds, and winds gusting through the valley.

Eve herself rattled around in the big house dusting what seemed to be a thousand figurines and other art objects gathered from her father-in-law's trips around the world. She had always wanted to live in a mansion, and now, finding herself in charge of this sprawling plantation house, she earnestly vacuumed rugs, and scoured bathrooms. When the house was clean, she ventured outside and picked the guava, the passion fruit, the avocados, oranges, and lemons that grew without volition in the yard. She bought cookbooks, learned to make guacamole and tropical fruit slush. She set the table with anthurium and bird-of-paradise centerpieces, and wore hibiscus and plumeria in her hair. She eventually learned to feed the chickens without worrying that they would peck her toes or fly up her skirt, and she had Bud build birdhouses and a birdbath for some of the mynah birds. But even given Hawaii's dust-laden breezes and mold-spawning humidity, the job did not require her full-time care. So she watched a few soap operas on television, subscribed to a few magazines. She even took the pickup down into Honolulu and got herself a library card and read books. One day she brought home a kitten, which she soon transformed into an overfed cat, but it didn't follow her anywhere. After a couple of years, Eve began to feel she'd conquered this brave new world.

A baby would change things, she thought. This idea, once planted, like everything else in Hawaii, burrowed deep, spread its roots, flourished. Before long, as if some wicked witch had zapped her with a magic spell, babies burst into her vision everywhere. They cooed to her from soap commercials on the television, caught her eye from the pages of magazines, beckoned from over luckier women's shoulders. "We'll make your life meaningful," they said to her with round and innocent eyes. "You'll learn things. Why aren't we born yet?"

She said to Bud one evening, "It's been a few years. Don't you think it's about time we started our family?" They were lying on the bed, the night breeze flowing in through the open lanai doors across their naked bodies, while the ceiling fan swooped lazily overhead to discourage the mosquitoes.

Bud's stomach muscles tightened under her hand. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

Eve tried to smooth the knots in his stomach muscles away. After awhile, she said, "You mean your father. Maybe he's forgotten what he said. It's been a long time, and he hasn't been to see us since we've been here."

Although the checks had kept coming, his father's failure to visit was a sore point with Bud. But he was far from complaining about it. "Of course, he meant what he said," he told Eve. "He always means what he says."

"But why, Bud? Why won't your father let us have a baby? We love each other. We should be able to do what we want."

Bud sighed. "I don't know, Eve. He says what he says. He doesn't have to have a reason." Pause. "But he always does."

Bud's trust in his father was absolute. Well, the man had raised him so maybe Bud had reasons she didn't know about. But Eve thought that

Bud's father could have at least explained. Why should they have to guess? After awhile, she kissed Bud's shoulder. She kissed the tender side of his neck. "Maybe we could have an accident," she murmured. "He couldn't hold an accident against us."

Bud grabbed her hand to stop its roaming. "Yes he could," he said. "He doesn't believe in accidents."

Eve looked up at him in the half-light shed by the moon outside the lanai windows and she didn't like what she saw. He was staring down at her as if he had just discovered she possessed a potentially criminal mind. "I couldn't lie to my father," he told her.

Sometimes he could be so annoyingly upright. He was so gentle bees would walk across his palm and not sting him. He could train birds to sit on his shoulder and give them names like Myrtle and Harry and Esther, and they answered when he called. Even the cat liked him. Bud treated her as sweetly as if she were part of himself, but he would never ever bend the rules. "Ok," Eve said. "Ok. You're right. Let's just drop it." She rolled away to her side of the bed.

"I love you," Bud said, but she didn't answer.

He was unintimidated by the silent treatment. He knew when he was right. The idea sank out of his consciousness like a stone sinking to the bottom of a deep pool.

But Eve couldn't seem to drop it. On her weekly grocery shopping trips, she took detours into department stores where the aisles fairly burst with pink and blue booties, fluffy nightgowns, delicate, lacy crib blankets, nubby little sleepers, all doll-sized. She had to fight for aisle space with what seemed like hordes of pregnant women, most, she thought, her age or only a little older. Their bellies swelled with mystery against their maternity dresses. Eve made a point of looking into their eyes, searching for clues to the secret they shared among themselves. The women looked back at her, their eyes veiled, grown up, wise; or, they looked away as if

they didn't even see her, the child bride. Then, Eve would stand and brood over the bassinets swathed in gauze mosquito netting and picture a small fuzzy head, maybe shaped like Bud's, maybe hers, lying there, sweetly sleeping, wrapped in the sun-dried, clover-scented receiving blankets she would prepare. A baby was the next stage of life. While Bud played at being a gardener in a climate where they couldn't stop things from growing, she was dammed, blocked up. And she could picture her womb drying up year by year until finally it hardened into a little kukui nut that would take a hammer to crack. She pushed the knot of anger that picture created like a sour pomegranate deep into the pit of her stomach.

One day Bud's older brother showed up. He appeared without warning on a Saturday afternoon as they lay on deck chairs beside the blue pool. The cat continued to purr and the stupid dog didn't even growl. Eve felt a shadow and opened her eyes to find him standing there, regarding them with an amused glint in his eye.

"Who are you?" she asked, not even afraid. He looked so familiar. Just like Bud, only older, handsomer, with lines of experience, maybe petulance, maybe cruelty, maybe with unholy laughter etched in his cheeks and around his eyes. Bud was silent beside her.

He knelt beside her chair, extended his hand. It was manicured. He smiled. "I'm your brother-in-law, Eve. Haven't you heard about me? Call me Stan."

He knew her name. Stan was the stuff of family legend. Bud's father had thrown him out years ago for being an incorrigible thief. At one time or another, he had tried to steal just about everything her father-in-law owned. Eve turned to Bud and saw fists of white skin lodged in the hollows of his cheeks. His lips moved, searching for words. "You can't stay here," he said after a moment. "Our father gave this place to us to care for. He doesn't want you here."

Apparently, Stan's feelings could not be hurt. "Now, now," he said, getting gracefully back to his feet and standing so his body blocked the sunlight. "My little peccadilloes took place years ago. I've knocked around the world quite a bit since then and learned a few things. I intend to make it all up with him when he comes to visit."

You won't find him here, Eve thought, but Bud spoke first. "He hasn't visited in a long time. He's very busy." She wondered if bitterness, disappointment, or longing colored Bud's tone.

Stan said, "He'll come when he finds out I'm here."

"No, he won't."

"Look," Stan said. "I need a place to stay."

"You can't stay here," Bud repeated.

Eve said, "Bud, wait. Maybe Stan really does want to make things right with your dad. Won't your father be pleased if you help bring the family back together?"

"You don't know what he's like, Eve. I was small when he left, but I'll never forget the way he split our family right down the middle over whether to throw him out or give him another chance. People screamed at each other and said terrible, unforgivable things."

"But people change," she pointed out.

"That's right," Stan echoed. "People change. Everything changes." He looked around. "Except up here, of course." He smiled and his white teeth gleamed in the sun. "Come on, Bud. Give me another chance." He looked sincere to Eve. His eyes seemed to dance with candor. She added her pleading look to his as they stared at Bud.

Bud hated to argue, but he said, "And sometimes people don't change at all. The answer is no." He clamped his lips shut and wouldn't say another word no matter how Stan urged him to forget the past.

But Stan wouldn't leave. Bud kicked him off the place, but he wouldn't go away. Where did he sleep? Under the porch? In the walls? Out in the trees? No matter. The effect was the same. Every time Eve turned a corner alone Stan was waiting. He could slip up behind her as silently as a snake, and she wouldn't know he was there until he put a hand on her shoulder, his fingers as warm as the sun through the thin cloth of her blouse. She soon found he was as easy to talk to as he was hard to discourage. He echoed all her secret thoughts. Before long, she was letting him into the house whenever Bud was safely out of sight, feeding him, listening to his stories. It was something to do. About his father, he was less than reverent. "He's a dictator," he said. "He wants to run everybody's life."

Eve thought he might be right. She told Stan how they couldn't have children.

Stan was gratifyingly sympathetic. "He's forbidden you to have babies! How can he do that? Think about it, Eve. Has he got private detectives hiding behind the curtains who jump out and say, 'Quit that!' whenever you and Bud get in the mood for sex?"

Eve knew Bud's father was powerful enough to hire a legion of special agents to watch over them, but so far he'd seemed to think his word was enough to keep them out of trouble. Personal intervention was generally not his style. "We owe him a lot," she said.

Stan didn't care about that. "You sound like you're married to him, not Bud."

Eve thought about how much Bud loved his father, how much the man had done for them. "In a way I am."

"Are you kidding?" Stan said. "How can you be so naive? He's just trying to keep both of you under his thumb. When Bud gets older and tired of you, our father will help him to find a more suitable companion."

Eve hadn't thought of their arrangement with Bud's father from this angle. Perhaps the situation was a little more urgent than she had imagined. "Bud will never agree to a baby without his father's permission," she sighed.

Stan sounded irritated. "The last thing you need from Bud is permission. Consider the miracle of the straight pin. Think what that would do to a diaphragm."

Eve left the room. The sly suggestion was more than she could handle in one sitting. Yet, unbidden, over the next several days a vision of her rubber diaphragm, so vulnerable in its little case to sharp objects, would float before her eyes. She could see herself sneaking into the bathroom and poking holes in it with a tiny needle. The sieve effect would be invisible to the naked eye unless the diaphragm was held up to the light, and Bud wasn't *that* careful. He only ever asked her if she had it in, not if she had mutilated it. She wouldn't even have to lie. They could attribute its failure to an act of, well, God. On the other hand, Bud's father did say there would be some pretty drastic consequences if they had a baby. When Stan slipped up to her in the garden and whispered in her ear, "Have you done it yet?" she shook her head.

"He said he'd punish us."

Stan snorted. "Oh hogwash. He loves Bud. He's not going to toss him out into the cold, cruel world without a nickel, is he? Not to mention the fact you'll be having Bud's *baby*, an heir, posterity, and so on."

She looked at Stan speculatively. "He did it to you."

Stan shrugged. "That was different."

She stared into his eyes, unable to look away. Was it? Was it worth the risk? She'd never been one to take risks. "He did tell us we could decide for ourselves," Eve mused.

Now Stan became insistent, brushing up against her in the kitchen, putting his lips next to her ear, breathing on the back of her neck, always asking, "Have you done it yet?" Warning her with his concerned glances that Bud could slip through her fingers like water if she didn't hold on somehow. Stan's words scared her. He scared her.

So for the first time in her life, Eve took what she considered to be a well calculated risk. The holes had virtually poked themselves in the diaphragm. And, on the appointed night, Bud had been most easily enticed into unknowing procreation. In retrospect, Eve reflected, almost no effort and even fewer brains were required to make a baby. That alone, she later decided, should have given her pause. Because the moment she became pregnant, it seemed, her body changed. Overnight, blue veins sprang up across her breasts like a highway road map. They grew ponderous. The nipples darkened. Her uterus, unused to all the new activity taking place within it, expanded and contracted, making her stomach ache as if she were having her period.

Then there was the nausea. In his knowledgeable and worldly way, Stan had promised her there would be no nausea. He had said that morning sickness was a fiction, a thing of the mind. Morning after morning as Eve bent over the toilet, then wiped vomit from her lips, she wondered if all of Stan's confident pronouncements were equally open to question. Her eyes had been opened. Now, the formerly invisible became all too evident.

Now, when she went to the grocery store, all the bright and shining angel babies had vanished. Instead, she saw a red-faced infant screaming in its hollow-eyed mother's grocery cart, the mouth an open cave with a little purple tongue flickering in and out. She saw a two-year-old, his nose streaming unwiped snot, one shoe off and one shoe on, run careening through the grocery store aisles, banging into shopping carts and knocking a Cheerios display all over the floor while a woman piloting a loaded

shopping cart shrieked, "Tony, come back here right now. Right now! Do you hear me?" Everybody heard her.

But that wasn't even the worst of it. Lying awake at night, Bud snoring gently beside her, Stan somehow suddenly gone, her mind roiled with things she had forgotten while listening to Stan and blithely stabbing holes in her diaphragm. Her own body was suddenly prey to a number of new ills: toxemia, prolapsed placenta, breech birth, caesarean section, stretch marks, and hemorrhoids. Then her mind turned to the baby relentlessly growing inside her, and she suddenly remembered colic, ear infections, whooping cough, measles, and pneumonia, midnight attacks of diarrhea and sudden vomiting. Worse, she remembered childhood brain tumors, leukemia, birth defects, Down's Syndrome. Then, she thought about summonses to parent-teacher conferences to hear about learning disorders, nearsightedness, and maladjustment. She remembered kids clumsy at sports who were picked last for every team, possibly her child. She remembered cars slamming through occupied crosswalks, babysitters who roasted infants for dinner, kidnappers, white slave traders, and child molesters, all, all on the lookout for her child.

Her child might be a boy. She thought of nasty boys who broke windows and painted graffiti on any empty surface, who used filthy words both as a kind of secret language and a badge of masculinity. She thought of grubby little males hiding behind the backs of buildings smoking filched cigarettes and making rude noises at passing little girls. She thought of scruffy boys with flying shirt-tails playing hooky from school, talking back to their mothers, beating up on younger siblings, tying cans to the tails of cats, and pulling wings off helpless flies. She thought of acne and raging teenage hormones, and she shuddered. She remembered dope addicts, hit-and-run drivers, sex fiends, mad bombers, serial killers—all of which her sons could possibly grow up to be. She heard gavels pounding in courtrooms and jail doors clanking shut behind them all.

Then she remembered whining little girls telling tattletales to get their friends and family members into delicious trouble. She remembered how stuck-up and clannish girls could be, running together in evil packs always making sure to exclude an unfortunate victim of the moment, probably her daughter. She remembered that girls thought their mothers were square, cheap, tacky, and ugly as soon as they hit age thirteen. She remembered bad hair days, shoplifting for profit and adventure, teenage PMS, slamming doors, and the unassuageable grief of no date for the prom. She remembered date rape, unwed pregnancies, wife abuse, married daughters who left shiftless husbands to return again to the parental homestead with four kids in tow.

She realized that once her baby was born she was never again going to be without worry in this world. She realized that some of her fears might even come true.

Bud. She was furious at him for not waking up and sensing her grief and fear. Why didn't her hollow eyes, her prolonged stays in the bathroom, the piled dishes, the dusty furniture tell him the world was about to change? No, he scrambled his own eggs and ate alone; he cheerfully went to the grocery store and made his own sandwiches and drank his chocolate milk, petted his dog, stroked the cat, and stared at the world through his sunlit blue eyes and patted her hip and talked about a flu bug going around. She wanted to smash that unconscious innocence of his with knowledge. She was beginning to hate the sight of his bland, unlined face, his unclouded eyes, his unbitten lips. He needed to get a grip on life—like she had.

"I'm pregnant," she told him. They were standing in their beautifully furnished living room. He had whistled "Zipidee doo dah, what a wonderful day" all the way up the path that evening. His face actually went stupid with shock. All the brightness drained away.

"Eve," he said, "do you know what you've done?"

"Yes, I do," she said. "I certainly do. But it seems to me it takes two to make a baby."

Her tone took him aback. He looked at her warily. She could see the thoughts behind his eyes changing, incorporating new and horrid ideas. "Is this one of those *accidents* we talked about earlier?"

She found she didn't even want to lie to him after all. She wanted him to know the truth, to share her misery in every sordid detail. She told him all about the punctured diaphragm.

He was not too aghast to discern there was even more to tell. "Where did you get these ideas?"

She bowed her head and told him about Stan.

"He's a devil," he said without inflection as if distracted. He was thinking of his father. "What's he going to do with you?"

"Wait a minute," Eve said. "Whatever he does, he'll do it to us, won't he? Isn't this all about what he's going to do with us, right?"

Bud slowly shook his head. He looked drawn. "You're the one who broke the rules, Eve."

She talked fast. "Look, anytime you have sex you're taking a chance on making a baby. That's part of it and always has been. I just increased our chances somewhat. But the responsibility is still half yours."

"People shouldn't make these decisions by themselves," he said.

"No one *can* make this decision by themselves!" she shrieked. She saw that they were both standing with clenched fists.

He chewed on his lower lip.

"What are you going to do, Bud?"

He frowned as if choosing a future were another new and unpleasant thought. "I don't know, Eve. I'm going to have to think about it." He walked away from her into the bedroom. Later, he emerged, pajamas tucked under his arm and said that he would sleep in the guest room.

Plenty of ways, he seemed to be saying, that he could manage very well without her. She glared at the pajamas. He'd never needed them before.

Their bed seemed huge, a flat white plate that she lay upon alone, served up like an offering to the impenetrable ceiling. She'd had reasons for doing what she did. It wasn't all Stan. She'd had all kinds of visions of the future, but they had always included Bud. Then one night she felt the baby move, a fluttering butterfly's wing, a pulsing membrane under the hand she had placed on her rounding stomach to still the ever-present nausea. She thought about all the fantasies she'd had while mooning around department store aisles, about the still-life paintings she'd visualized as her children. Dolls. Then she thought about all the bratty children she'd seen on the streets and in the grocery store. People. The trembling life beneath her palm was a person. Growing. So was Bud. So was she. So were they. Then she thought: *What if Bud never cares about that?*

He came into the bedroom one night, his tall form silhouetted against the light from the living room, and stood just beyond the doorway. "Eve" he said.

"I'm awake."

"I hate being alone out there without you."

She sighed and pulled back the sheet. "Then come in here."

He came closer, sighed himself. "My father's going to disown us."

"No he won't," she said. "He wanted this to happen."

"Why would he want us to disobey him?"

"Well," she said, "two years ago, he didn't want you to. Now maybe it's time to move on."

He came a step closer. "But he'll still throw us out of here."

Eve said, "Probably. That seems to have been the deal. But we'll have the baby."

"Why can't we have the baby and stay here, too?"

"You figure it out," said Eve. "You're the one who says he always has reasons."

He came around to his side of the bed where Eve had pulled back the sheet and climbed in. He pulled Eve in to the hollow of his arm. "This feels good," he said. "So much better than being out there."

"Now you know," Eve said and buried her head into the delicious, warm place where his neck met his shoulder.

After that, for awhile, they didn't even think about Bud's father. But he seemed to be thinking about them. One day, his white limousine pulled up in the driveway. Bud would normally have been overjoyed because it had been so long since his father had been to see them. Instead he was frightened. He turned panicky eyes to Eve's burgeoning belly. "He's going to take one look at you and know you're pregnant. Quick, go put on something big so he won't be able to tell."

Eve gave him a look that would have withered grass. Faced with the reality of his father's presence, he seemed to have forgotten all the secret joys they had whispered about together during the long, warm nights. Hide, should she? She stalked into the bedroom and pulled open his closet door so hard the hangers rattled and grabbed at Bud's raincoat, a garment that came below her ankles and covered her hands. She marched back into the living room with as much dignity as she could while stumbling over a trailing hem.

Bud glared at her for a long moment when she emerged, then sank down hopelessly on the couch. His father, looking large, benign and handsome, stood in his white tropical suit in the middle of their living room. He walked over to kiss her hello, and she smelled his aftershave, sensed his kindness. He looked her over and raised a humorous eyebrow. "Interesting fashion statement," he remarked.

Eve smiled and let the coat gap open. Bud groaned. His father's smile sobered at the sound. He turned to Bud. "Just what's been going on here?"

In Eve's eyes, Bud was nearly babbling. "She did it. It's her fault." He actually pointed his finger at Eve as if his father might be confused about which woman in the room he was referring to.

Bud's father turned to her. "Eve?" His eyes were so very blue, she thought, and they seemed to drill right into her.

All her well-thought-out speeches evaporated under his stern gaze. She blamed Bud a little less for his retreat into childhood. She said, "Stan was here. He talked me into it." That wasn't the whole truth, but the look on her father-in-law's face seemed to preclude further remark. She'd definitely liked it better when he was smiling. Eve went over and sat beside Bud and took his hand.

"Where is Stan now?" he asked.

She hung her head. "I don't know. I guess he left."

Bud's father looked grim. "He'll be back. He always seems to come back." He thought for a moment. "So you've decided to strike out on your own, have you?"

Just as they feared. The man never went back on his promises. Then Eve remembered Stan's nickel-plated guarantee that Bud's father would be thrilled to get an heir, that he would not toss them out without a nickel. It seemed worth a try. She said, "Aren't you pleased you're having a grandchild?"

"Yes," he said, "I am." His face was suddenly filled with both joy and sorrow. Eve guessed the sorrow was for all the things that were going to happen to them that they weren't going to like. But he wasn't going to do a thing to make it easier for them. "But aren't you pleased you're young, bright, healthy enough to take care of it?" He wasn't being sarcastic at all. Disobedience was disobedience in his view.

Bud said, "Couldn't you find a job for me?"

His father said, "I don't think so. Not yet. I'd like to see how you do on your own first."

Bud said, "You're disinheriting me?"

His father shook his head. "You know better than that. I'll be around to see how you're doing."

Eve had yet another vision of the future. They were going to be poor. They would have to live in an apartment with furniture that other people had used and worn out, with flaking paint on the walls and worn rugs on the floor. The weather would get cold. They would have to pay heating bills. She would have to shop at places where customers marked their own prices and the pens would be irritatingly defective, and she would have to buy generic brands. They would have to save soda bottles to get enough money for Friday night movies. The neighborhood they would live in would be filled with used bookshops, seedy mom and pop liquor stores, and boarded-up service stations. Their car would be a junker with bald tires and strange and frightening noises emanating from under the hood, which they wouldn't be able to afford to investigate, let alone fix. Her baby's clothes would be hand-me-downs, stained with other baby's meals and adventures. The few new ones would come from K-Mart. Her house-dresses would fade. Bud's suits would grow baggy. There would be no room for dogs, cats, or chickens. Strangely, the prospect didn't seem that bad. "I'll make my own bread," she told herself. "I'll learn to sew. I'll hang cute curtains on the windows."

Bud, too, had been thinking. He looked his father in the eye. "Okay," he said. He put his arm around Eve and in doing so, he seemed to grow larger and stronger. She leaned back into the warmth of his shoulder.

When his father left, Bud hugged him hard, as if the solid feel of the man had to last in his memory for the rest of his life. When he finally pulled back, Eve, too, stepped forward to be folded in her father-in-law's embrace. Surprised, she felt his tears on her own cheek. Now she wanted

to comfort him. Even matchstick bigwigs couldn't control everything. "It had to be done," she murmured.

"Yes," he said. "It was time."

Thus, Eve and Bud set off to conquer the world on their own. Even so, they had no real idea at all what they'd gotten themselves into.

Transcendental

This high priced oral surgeon
Hangs a rusty pitchfork
On the wall of his reception room.
I'm waiting for my extraction
And I don't need the distraction
Of wondering whether these
Are objects of torture
or object d'art.
I object.

I'm already into him (or is he into me?)
Forty bucks or more for a "consultation"
To preview the operation in excruciating
Detail. I'm also bummed that he's
Made me choose between being
Numbed and paying extra for a
Local anesthetic. This from
A guy whose aesthetic for
Office decor is antique
Farm implements.

When his nurse finally puts me in the chair
(It's taken several weeks to get there
Since the surgeon ran out on my
Appointment to attend a funeral—a former
Patient, probably—more patient anyway than me),
I'm not what you'd call relaxed. I'm
Feeling nostalgia for the efficiency
of dentistry's Dark Age. I'm thinking
That by now I'd have long since been
Picked, or raked, or axed.

This feels just like the buzz you get
From alcohol, she says, and gives me laughing gas.
From out of nowhere, enter Dr. Lind. The
surgeon is a stringbean Scandinavian, who
Asks—peculiarly—you ever been to
Goshen? I'm gulping gas, I've got my
Second wind. I know it's somewhere
South, but cannot answer. He's
Poking in my mouth. Meanwhile
I'm bobbing on some timeless ocean.

He tells a story then, damnedest thing I've ever heard.
Land o' Goshen on the shores of Utah Lake. Floating
Captive in my chair, I'm rapt for every word.
A rural Mormon ward. His friend lies dead. An
Open coffin. Cowboys in the choir. The bishop's brow is
Furrowed. They sing a hymn of praise to coffee
Drinking 'round the fire. The pews are filled with
Reprobates. As they pass the bier to pay their last
Respects, an old coot lights a cigarette, and says,
I hope he resurrects.

—*Paul Swenson*

Paul Swenson reviews books for *The Salt Lake Tribune* and writes film criticism and media criticism for *The Event*. His poetry has appeared in *Weber Studies*, *Ellipsis*, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, and *The Mormon Women's Forum Quarterly*.

Plantains

Lisa Madsen de Rubilar

TONIGHT I AM FRYING PLANTAINS FOR DINNER, A LONG-POSTPONED experiment with the past. The plantains are black, fuzzy with mold, weak at the stems, but when I slit them open the inner flesh lies slick and pink along my fingers. It isn't too late, after all.

In 1974 and 1975, I ate plantains every morning for breakfast. Gloria fried them in oil and brown sugar, and their smell filled the house. I haven't eaten a plantain–or smelled one cooking–since then; since I was eleven years old, suffering for love, and playing tetherball near the banana trees in our backyard where blind Tilio, the gardener, scythed the terraces with careful strokes and clipped the edges with rusted shears. Near the tetherball, on the marbled back porch, my mother once abandoned my two-year-old brother to a dance with an upright lizard after she escaped into the kitchen. Guilt mingles with laughter whenever she remembers.

The floors inside were marbled, too, kept slick and shining by the maids. There were no hallways: the front door on the first floor and the bedrooms on the third were separated by a large expanse of air and an

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open, two-tiered staircase of smooth stone slabs. On the second floor I whirled to Russian folk music and ate sweet plantains for breakfast. On the third-floor landing my older sister Marion revealed one morning what it meant that Mary the mother of Jesus was a virgin. This same sister balanced a bucket of water atop my bedroom door on April Fool's Day, found a scorpion in her shoe, a bat in her bed, and a rabid dog whiffling in the carport. She tape recorded a whooping cough attack for the benefit of posterity. We can still listen to her gasping and retching, struggling for air, as my mother calls in a high-pitched voice for my father.

In the kitchen, there was a place where you could lift up the counter to reveal a square compartment underneath. The fairies danced there at night. I never got to see them in person because even if I set the alarm, I was too tired or scared to make a trip through the dark house to look. But I did see fairy lights winking on a black hillside in Honduras. On a trip from El Salvador to Copan, our car headlights went out on a mountain road, and it was black, blacker than I've ever seen, except that from time to time a tiny light would blink briefly here or there on the facing hill. About the time we'd decide our eyes played tricks, another one would blink.

When I was sick once, my mother brought me *Harriet, the Spy* to read in bed. I was not as effective a spy as Harriet. I could never catch my stuffed animals in the act: they rough-housed sometimes at the foot of my bed, but only when I wasn't there. My Sunshine Family dolls were more dependable. I equipped their house with nutshell cups and bowls, miniature tea kettles, and a well I made out of a tin can encased in dried salt dough, complete with a crank to raise a tiny bucket on a string. The Sunshine couple had a cute blond baby not more than six months old. Sometimes they made love guiltily in their bedroom.

Our house was across the street from a golf course in an upper-class neighborhood of San Salvador, El Salvador. Up the street, where the land

rose high and grassy then dropped back to street level as a jagged cliff, a mansion was guarded by dogs and a spiked iron fence. Because of the cliff, you couldn't see the mansion by walking down our street; you had to go around the block and look through the fence from the other side. In the opposite direction, where our street ended in an abrupt and dusty gully, grew a shanty town. Ragged children came from there almost every day to get water at our house. Our cistern didn't hold a limitless supply of water, so we kept the faucet handle inside the house. When the children rang the bell, we passed it to them through the bars on a tiny window in the front door.

Children also crawled through the barbed wire fence that surrounded the golf course to get water. I watched them do this early in the mornings–when the air was still cool and quiet–from the balcony that overlooked the street. At that hour the golf course was an unruffled green lagoon, becalmed except for the children who struggled briefly and urgently against the barbed wire along the shore. I liked the quietness of the balcony at sunrise. Early Easter morning I sat up there and read the Bible. "Why weepest thou? Who seekest thou?" Jesus said to Mary after his resurrection.

I was a very religious child. When a girl at school told me *Mormon* sounded like *moron*, I was pleased she knew even that much about my faith.

I taught Gloria about the *Book of Mormon*. Gloria was our cook, who fried plantains every morning in oil and brown sugar and cooked yucca roots to tender flakiness in the evenings. While she ate corn tortillas and beans for lunch at the small table in the kitchen, I read her the scriptures and explained them to her. I think she believed everything I told her.

The missionaries who often came to our house did not teach Gloria, perhaps because she qualified as one of the "very poor" who were off-limits to them, or perhaps because she was not interested in the message after

all. They came not to teach, but to eat the meals Gloria prepared for them. Copious amounts of food disappeared from their plates before they stood abruptly to say thank you and good-bye. Later, in Colorado, when the missionaries came for dinner and stayed and stayed, my mother would comment that the missionaries in El Salvador were hungry, but they were never lazy.

At Christmas time, I saved up my allowance to buy five chickens and some small bags of beans and rice, which I gave to the children who came to our door for water. After the food was all gone, more children kept coming. They kept coming until I wondered if I had been wrong to give chickens at all with so many people in need of those chickens.

Once Marion, Stephanie, and I went with some little children to their cardboard shack in the gully. I think we took along a chicken then, too. John F. Kennedy was smiling on the wall next to a crucified Christ. I remember an old man and a dirt floor and a table. There were women, too, with wide dry feet who were gracious in the face of our ignorance and richness.

When women got pregnant, they did not buy maternity clothes. They walked back and forth down our street on solemn feet, backs erect below enormous bundles of sticks or urns of water, bellies tight and mysterious inside their narrow dresses.

Our sedate neighborhood ticked peacefully below a warm, never sweltering, sun and–in the rainy season–glowed with bougainvillea. The silence was interrupted only by the screeching brakes of the bottled water truck that pulled up in front of our house like a giant, luminous beehive, each cell a shimmering fishless aquarium; by the firecrackers (big as my waist) that the missionaries exploded on New Year's eve; and by the bullets the neighborhood watchman fired at the rabid dog, in intervals, all night long, after driving him out of our carport.

Plantains

Downtown San Salvador was a different story. My first, terrified impression of the place was from the window of a taxi cab hurtling from the airport into an unbelievable chaos of automobiles, human bodies, and three-wheeled bicycles. Clutching the seat with both hands, I prayed to go home. But my father, an agricultural economist, had a two-year assignment with US AID, and we stayed. I didn't dream then that–years later as a freshman at BYU–a class excursion to Mexico would be the trip home I hoped for; that the market smells of rotting fruit and diesel exhaust, the tangled concourse of bikes and buses, the sing-song shouts of street-corner vendors would provide absolute refuge from adolescent depression and a steely Provo winter. What you live as a child, in happiness, becomes home.

I was happy in El Salvador. I learned that bananas point upwards, not down, when they're growing on the tree. I found that kicking the boys in the shins was the best way to gain control of a soccer ball. I learned that mangos are better when eaten slightly green, before the tanginess evolves into orange strings that stay between your teeth. I saw flying fish burst from the water around me as I waded in the sea; watched for human excrement on the beach. I learned that people can live wherever there is ground; that some live in mansions guarded by dogs, but that cardboard will do for a roof except in heaviest rain. I learned gratitude for my own roof, especially at night, during storms when lightning exploded against the tiles like a bomb going off.

In the end, I learned to love the descent from our quiet neighborhood into the dirty bustle of the city below where sewers ran as open streams and the fruits in market stalls were bright and invariably sweet. I have since wondered why the Salvadoran people chose the word *Guinda*—sour cherry—to describe the nighttime flight of women and children from the bombs that rained onto rural land during the recent 12-year civil war. I

never tasted a sour fruit in El Salvador. Even the pineapples were sweet in that country. And I never saw a single cherry.

During the war many neighborhoods in San Salvador were completely razed as FMLN guerrillas took cover behind civilians and the government bombed indiscriminately to drive them out. More than a quarter of the population lost their homes during the conflict; more than 75,000 people perished. But the San Salvador I knew was full of life and–at the handcraft markets–laden with miniature vases, cloth dolls, rough carvings of horses and wolves, shell necklaces. My sisters and I considered ourselves masters at bargaining. We always got a deal.

Riding along downtown in the back seat of our green Ford station wagon that always smelled vaguely of gasoline, we'd burst into a loud chant whenever we passed a Toyota billboard. "Tu!" (backhanding each other), "Yo!" (slapping our own chests), "Y Toyota!" (flinging arms wide in each other's faces). We were engaged in this chant when the news came over the radio that President Nixon had resigned. "Stop that," my father said. "Stop that and listen. It's finally really happened."

One evening after dark, we got lost driving home from downtown, and found ourselves on a hilltop at a dead end. My father muttered to himself as he shifted the car into reverse, into forward, into reverse to turn the car around, but the metropolis glistened below like an underwater city of mer-people. Magical. Opulent.

In fact, I got my first taste of real luxury in the San Salvador hotel where we stayed for two weeks after our arrival. While my parents looked for a house, we ate Continental Breakfasts at the bar, swam in the pool, fooled around on the elevators. Once I got my hand caught when the door opened, and for a split second thought it was gone for good. Another time, Ernest Borgnine, who was judging the Miss Universe pageant, rode

up with us. He knew we recognized him, and told us so by staring straight ahead.

By coincidence, another North American Mormon family was staying at the same hotel. Later they were in our ward, but we first discovered their presence when wads of paper began dropping onto our heads from the balcony above ours. We got to know the three boys, who were around our ages, when their mother had a miscarriage and their father brought them to stay with us while he took her to the hospital. Only now, so many years later, can I feel for the woman–watching a part of her future bleed away on an unfamiliar bathroom floor in a strange land. At the time her misfortune was an opportunity for me to have the time of my life.

We spent the day playing miniature golf and elevator tag, and I believe it was that night I swam underwater from one end of the pool to the other, heading for the lights that glowed from the sides like great fish eyes, telling myself to always remember that bizarre and luminous glow. And I have. I even remember that the water was so warm that the warm evening air felt cold when you climbed out to stand on the diving board. I remember it all. I see myself clearly, but as from a great distance, with a mixture of tenderness and disdain. Not long ago I read the testimonial of a Honduran woman who said she'd watched white, rich children playing in a pool, and wondered how this could be, when her own children were slowly starving outside the gates.

In Colorado, my sisters and I had roamed about our neighborhood, played in the vacant lot behind our house, rode our bikes to school and piano lessons. In El Salvador we were never allowed to walk alone, even from the bus stop to our house. Gloria came to get us. Downtown, soldiers with machine guns stood on the steps of banks, in parks, on street corners. At the university, the students were always on strike. My father heard from the peasants he met on his trips to the countryside that a massacre

of protesting coffee workers had taken place in a nearby village, but he never found a reference to it in a newspaper. A woman my mother met at a party complained of the evil people trying to take away her rights and her land. She was a U.S. citizen who, having married into the 14-family oligarchy, resided in a resort home surrounded by her coffee plantation.

We have a photograph of my brother Christopher, two years old, at a public pool, plump stomach in the foreground, gazing at a thin child whose stomach is even more distended. My brother looks concerned.

On Saturdays, we sometimes drove to the United States embassy to watch movies. Popcorn was not allowed in the theater, and a movie called *Warm December* contained the longest kiss in history. When Dr. Zhivago glimpsed Laura for the last time, he clutched at his heart before dying in the street, while the baseball player in *Bang the Drums Slowly* spit tobacco juice and died of cancer. The burning bush in *The Ten Commandments* spawned dark, swirling nightmares that lasted for weeks, but the embassy was a safe place for love and death–unlike the sidewalk outside. A tall Peace Corps worker named Mark, a friend of my parents, was walking down this busy sidewalk toward the embassy when a man leapt at him with a knife. Mark's long arms saved his life. He held the assailant at a distance that allowed only a half inch of blade to penetrate his rib cage. There was no apparent reason for the attack.

One night my family drove to a regular downtown theater to see the movie *Paper Moon* with Spanish subtitles. People were getting their beds ready in the gutters as we walked along the sidewalk on the way to the theater. There was a man without any feet. Tatum O'Neil was just my age, and I thought she was Something Else: cocky, bad, and proud of it. I was almost to the age of horrible anguish for my own squareness–but not quite. On another occasion when my parents dropped me off downtown with a friend to see a film of the Swan Lake ballet, I was a little smug in

the knowledge of my own sophistication. I danced to Swan Lake on the airy second floor of my house.

Tonight, on my way home in heavy Atlanta traffic to cook plantains for dinner, Swan Lake was playing on the radio. But my plantains aren't turning out as soft and sweet as Gloria's, although the smell is the same: the smell of late childhood, when I worried that nonexistent breasts might show through my undershirt, carried secret love like a wound in my heart, and wrote code words like "clandestine" on pieces of curly tree bark which I hid for my friends to find along the sidewalk by our recreational club. Alison. Michelle. Elisa Ventura.

We ate lunch sitting in trees outside the *Escuela Americana*. The school's hallways were outside also, and when it rained you got wet as you walked from one room to another. Classes were taught in English and Spanish. Mr. Charlip kicked his chair into the wall one day when we wouldn't be quiet.

I remember three other bad things that happened at school: One rainy afternoon, I was running down the hallway full-tilt when a door opened in my path, sending me and my books flying violently in ten directions. Everything was black for a minute or two, but the keen embarrassment lasted much longer than that. Then there was the time I lost my wolf's head. I'd worn the rough-carved beast on a string around my neck for several months (whether I was in Sunday best or blue jeans) as a good luck talisman. He was ugly, but I'd come to depend on him. Then one day after recess the wolf was missing, and I spent several days scouring the school grounds. Never found him. Maybe that's why, on the same playground, I hit the catcher squarely in the mouth with a baseball bat. I still hear the horrifying, slightly sucking thud of the bat connecting with her flesh. I hear her screaming.

Marion stayed home from school for more than two months when she had the whooping cough. It was scary when she couldn't breathe. My grandmother's sister had died as a baby of whooping cough. After Marion got better, my father drove my sisters and me to the bus stop every morning and waited with us until the bus came. This usually wasn't long. More often than not it had already gone by, and we would chase it down the wide Escalón road in our US AID jeep, pass it, jump out at the next stop just as the bus came swooping to a halt.

One day we rode the bus home from school in a hard rain. Along the way people stopped the bus to tell the driver that a mud bank had just slid down on top of a row of shanty houses, killing everyone inside. I don't remember why they stopped the bus and told the driver this. I remember the rain kept falling against the windows and the windshield wipers squeaked across the glass. The day was cold.

Another memory: in an El Salvador graveyard, I saw the feet of a dead person sticking out from under a sheet. The person was lying face up on a cement platform inside a little building. I looked hard at the dead feet. My father said the person would be buried that way–wrapped in the sheet and put in the ground.

Our second Christmas in El Salvador, my grandmother, still adjusting to widowhood, came to visit for a month. Three years before–just after Christmas–in the back of an ambulance traversing Thistle Canyon in a snowstorm, my grandfather died. On this Christmas, my grandmother lay with my family on our terraced back lawn and looked up at the stars.

We took her to Guatemala to visit Lake Atitlan, riding in a small motorboat across blue and spangled water. Marion was teasing again, and I sulked angrily at the back of the boat the whole way over. On the opposite shore, children decked out in dirt and bright clothing shouted, "Saca ma puch! Saca ma puch!" –an alphabet soup of English and Spanish that

meant *Take my picture.* We paid them a few coins in return for their faces. Most Indians won't let tourists take them home on film because their souls are forced, unwillingly, to go along.

There are virtually no indigenous peoples in El Salvador; after government troops massacred 30,000 Indians in 1932 to quell unrest on the coffee plantations, they knew they weren't welcome. In Guatemala the Indians pit the colors on their looms against a gray fate. Their bright, patterned clothing brings joy wherever they trudge weighed with babies, wood, and water, their faces sagging under the burden of existence.

On the shore of Lake Atitlan, I feared for my grandmother's life. In the middle of the night, I heard her gasping for breath in the bed across the room. I crept to her side in the darkness. "Grandma!" I whispered. "Are you all right?" She awoke and began to laugh and is still laughing whenever she tells someone how her snoring was so loud that night, I thought she was dying.

My grandmother is a laughing person, and she laughed a lot in El Salvador that Christmas season. She laughed when Gloria tried to teach her a few words in Spanish, and when my mother told her how the lizard danced with my brother on the back porch. She laughed when a visiting general authority at church, caught off guard when she spoke to him in English, said he thought she was a "white-haired native woman." She laughed when I told her about a woman with couches like cumulonimbus clouds (I'd learned the term in school), which were permanently occupied by porcelain and pottery vases–in case of earthquake.

I remember most vividly that my grandmother cried when we learned that the prophet Harold B. Lee had died. I think the missionaries told us. "But he was so young," my grandmother said over and over. "He wasn't supposed to die so young." I wondered how a man with white hair could be young, and how she was sad for someone she'd never met.

Eleven years afterwards I was a missionary in Chile when I learned that the prophet Spencer W. Kimball had died. I stood in a doorway in Valdivia, and wept.

The archbishop of El Salvador, Oscar Romero, died more in the manner of Joseph Smith–violently–shot through the heart as he celebrated mass in the cathedral downtown. This was five years after we left the country, in March of 1980. The day before, he had given a radio address in which he protested the daily murders of *campesinos*. He named their names and gave the number of their dead. "Brothers," he said to the National Guard, the police, and the military, "you come from our own people. You are killing your brothers." Romero's own murder was the lighted match that ignited full-fledged civil war. By the end of that year, 10,000 civilians had died at the hands of government forces, and within three years the number had reached 1932 proportions: 30,000. In the name of fighting Communism, the U.S. government undertook the economic and military support of Manuel Duarte's regime, which Amnesty International accused of some of the worst human rights abuses ever recorded.

Our peaceful neighborhood of Escalón was itself the site of more than one bloody assassination, probably carried out by members of the FMLN. We heard about the killings on TV in Colorado, and it all seemed so unbelievable, so far away.

When we left in 1975, the civil war was still years in the future, although the FALANGE–the first government-backed death squads–were already operating. My father, who went into the countryside to look at farm plots and touch the soil with his fingers, told us that the *campesinos* were terrified of anyone in uniform. Some wouldn't talk even to him. Others generously offered him juice or sugar water (which, if he gave in to thirst and accepted, resulted in severe stomach cramps and diarrhea).

My parents and grandmother had a scare one afternoon when they drove to the foot of the volcano Bocarón. On the way back, a group of soldiers loaded down with machine guns and cartridges, flagged down the car and demanded a ride. They did not ask. It was not a request. They squeezed into the back, guns clanking and weaving, then rode in obdurate silence into town, gun barrels pointed at the back of my parents' heads.

Gloria fried plantains for breakfast every morning, rinsed lettuce leaves in a Clorox solution, and made bread from whole wheat flour the way my mother taught her. (She never ate the bread herself; she liked corn tortillas and beans.) Every Sunday night I feasted on her bread crumbled in milk with spoonfuls of jam. We got used to the daily luxury of that bread. Not like now, when homemade bread calls for a binge with honey and butter.

Gloria taught Christopher to speak Spanish. From his high chair he'd scream at her angrily, the blue vein on the side of his neck blossoming outwards, "Vaya!" –*Get out of here*. Gloria laughed at his anger, the crescent of gold on her front tooth glinting. Once she brought her three-year-old daughter to visit. We have a snapshot of a solemn little girl dressed in pink lace sitting on the piano bench, one side of her paralyzed. Gloria lived with us all week and saw her girl only on Sundays. When she returned from her day off, she brought the pungent odor of poverty into our house. I don't know who took care of the child while Gloria was working.

Eight or nine years after we returned to Colorado, Gloria called from Texas. She had escaped from the war zone in El Salvador with her daughter and was living in the U.S. illegally with a relative or a friend. My mother couldn't make out most of what Gloria said, having forgotten most of her Spanish, but she wondered if Gloria might not show up one

day on our doorstep and ask for asylum. We waited for her, but she never came.

The church we attended was in a middle class neighborhood of San Salvador. "Middle Class" meant you had at least a tin roof over your head, which was also the unspoken prerequisite for being taught the gospel. We went home one Sunday with a friend from church who served us cookies in a dark, empty room with paint peeling off the cement walls. Considering our own airy and marbled landings, it is amazing that the ward members took us in with such abandon and affection. Their hearts were truly great.

They especially loved my brother, that plump, blue-eyed toddler. Everywhere he went, an admiring crowd followed. His special friend was Armando, the Central American heavyweight wrestling champion. Christopher spent part of every Sacrament meeting wriggling in Armando's tremendous arms.

The ward members also loved my mother, who brought them The Music every Sunday. Before we arrived, the miniature organ that stood at the front of the chapel had been silent for many years, with maybe a missionary or two stumbling out some hymns from time to time. But my mother could play "Secret Prayer" with precision and fervor, and the congregation belted it out with gusto. When she played Bach or Haydn as postlude, most of the congregation stayed in their seats until it was over. Afterwards, small, crooked women hugged my mother in gratitude, tears rolling from their eyes.

The ward members knew how to have a good time. If there was a youth dance, everybody went. The old folks sat along the walls, the babies crawled around the floor, and the young people danced. If it was sunshiny after church, everyone stopped at the ice cream cart parked outside the gate and bought cones before heading home. If it was raining, everyone

laughed and talked in the hallways. They had a good time when they were together, but felt no particular obligation to come to church when they didn't feel like it, or–which was more likely the case–when they didn't have the heart for it, or spare coins for bus fare.

At first I didn't understand anything the members said. As they bore teary, unintelligible testimonies at the pulpit, I fiddled with the soft spots on the bench where termites were devouring the wood. Then one day, I realized I was listening. I realized I understood.

After church meetings, I dashed with the other children round and round the church building, hid behind the giant poinsettia bushes, inspected the chickens that the caretaker kept out back. The church building was surrounded by a high, iron-barred fence lined by a few thin fir trees that provided spotty shade along one side. Under those trees the earth smell was as loamy and deep as the passion I carried inside my chest. I longed to graduate from Primary so I could be nearer the object of my affections, who had advanced to Mutual. By the time I did, he had already left the ward.

My father was the scout master. At first he'd been the young men's president, but he told the bishop, after several weeks when no teachers showed up, (my father has told this story many times), "Make me scout master so at least I'll have something prepared."

It's not that the members weren't committed. I understood the depth of their faith even before I could understand their impassioned words in testimony meeting. It's just that in a country where termites eat the benches out from under you, and you can hear their machinations during sacrament prayers and you go home with a rash on your shoulders and thighs; in a country where it either rains every night or doesn't rain at all for months; in a country where fear of death is not a distant dream but a way of life; where every other tree has been burned in behalf of a corn

tortilla while plantations of coffee trees flourish inside barbed wire fences; and where rich people keep vases on sofa cushions in case of earthquake while poor people get wrapped in a sheet and stuck in the ground, each exertion must be weighed carefully against its counterforce.

My father has never been capable of meting out his exertions with care. He overwhelmed the scouts with exertions on their behalf. These were boys who had learned to expect nothing–who lived a few miles from the beach, but had never seen the sea, who lived in the shadow of a volcano, but had never set foot on its slopes. When my father planned a hike to that volcano, Bocarón, only two scouts showed up to take part. Their report of the day's adventures stunned those who'd stayed home, who never dreamed the excursion would really happen. Compassionate, my father planned another trip. This time the doubting Thomases, too, showed up at 6:30 a.m., ready to climb.

I went along on the second trip. The trail to the top was busy with men carrying wood on their shoulders in a way that kept their heads twisted down and to one side, and with women, erect as always under the loads on their heads. We were there for adventure, but most of the others on the path were on missions for cornmeal, wood, or water. Missions of life.

The scouts' shoulders and thighs worked jubilantly as they climbed the slope of the volcano they'd looked at every day of their lives. They were happy. I remember their easy jubilance. I see them in my mind as they climb. Tonight as I cook plantains for dinner, I wonder what they are doing now. How many of them died in the fighting.

There are only two seasons in El Salvador: the wet and the dry. In the rainy season, mud banks collapsed atop the roofs of cardboard shacks and killed people. The bougainvillea and fuchsia glowed a brilliant sunrise during daylight hours, and the hills, the grass, the volcano glowed green. In the rainy season lightning struck the roof of our house with a terrifying

"blam!" and the school bus's windshield wipers squeaked all the way to and from school. In the dry season, cows and dogs along the side of the road turned into leather bird cages on legs; Blind Tilio couldn't keep the grass in our yard from turning yellow; and dust smoked up from the women's stately, burdened march down our street. In the dry season we couldn't lend the tap handle to the children who came to the house because our cistern was nearly empty. We climbed down inside the tank and passed up buckets of filmy water that we used to flush the toilets. We had bottled water to drink, but I don't know what the children from the gully did when we turned them away from our door.

Stephanie was baptized at the beginning of a dry season. My father lifted her dripping and pure from the font of baptism water. Her hair was still wet and her body cool when I hugged her afterwards. "Just think, right now you have no sins!" I said. This was very real to me. I didn't want her to do anything bad, nothing to mar that purity, ever. When we fought later that evening, I felt guilty and sad.

As I fry plantains tonight and my apartment takes on the aroma of childhood ending, as my own small children chuckle over green playdough at the kitchen table and a spring breeze jiggles the plants in the window, a National Public Radio report on El Salvador comes over the air. The report says declassified documents show the U.S. government knew all along that the regime it stockpiled with weapons was murdering its own people. Nobody wanted to know, so they pretended not to. When a U.S. journalist reported a mass execution in the rural area of El Mazote, The Wall Street Journal accused him of making it up.

I can scarcely bear to listen. A coward, I reach through the steam of plantains turning gold in my frying pan and turn off the news. The last thing I hear is this: they've found the bones in El Mazote. Hundreds of them.

I've never returned to El Salvador, but peace, I hear, is returning at last. A treaty has been signed, elections have been held, and a new government has been formed. Yet I read in the papers that thugs are still killing people–a woman as she nurses her child in a bedroom, a man as he pulls up to a red light on his way to work. The killing may not end as long as a handful of people live in fear and opulence behind spiked iron fences, a few more live between flaking walls and tin roofs, and even more erect cardboard over their heads that disintegrates when it rains.

Now the *Wall Street Journal* is printing editorials that say poverty was at the root of the war; that while the East Asians were combating the Communist threat by feeding and educating the poor, the Latin Americans were busy killing anyone who said he was hungry.

I was not there for the bloodshed, but I know about the hunger. I was witness to the poverty. I sat in its cardboard house and breathed its dust. I saw its wide, dry feet; its tight, mysterious belly. And that has changed forever who I am.

Sometimes the glint of Gloria's tooth as she laughed filled the whole house with light. The other maids who came and went were simply maids, but Gloria was Gloria. I loved her. One of the others, named Laura, rarely spoke, and moved among our things with a sour expression on her face. "She is smart," my mother said, "and that is why she is angry." My mother understood, but in the end she had to fire Laura, whose rage was overflowing the house. After she left, Gloria's sister came to work for awhile, but her slack-jawed slowness drove everyone to distraction. At last, only Gloria remained.

I wish I'd asked Gloria where her daughter stayed during the week, and whether her child needed a chicken to eat. I wish I'd asked her if she really

liked tortillas and beans better than bread and milk and jam. I wish I'd told her she didn't need to eat in the kitchen.

I never did. But Gloria loved me anyway. One day she patted me affectionately on the rear end, in the exact spot where I'd had a gamma globulin shot, and we both laughed afterwards about the great leap I took toward the ceiling. She was often the silent, approving audience of my dance around the furniture to the music of Swan Lake. Yet I don't remember saying good-bye to her. When the boy I loved left El Salvador, I stood on the staircase staring at a closing door, telling myself "Never again. Never. Never. Never. Never." Surely I must have cried to leave Gloria, but I can't remember a thing.

Not long ago I found her name in my mother's address book, above two out-dated addresses X-ed over in pencil and ink. Gloria Tomasa Cañas. Seeing it there on my way to an aunt's or a cousin's name made her seem, suddenly, very near. I almost spoke her name aloud.

Gloria. If you were standing beside me at this moment, you would tell me how to make these plantains as soft and sweet as yours. You would tell me how to fix yams so the marshmallows puff brown and round on top; how to pat corn tortillas into a perfect circle; make yeast and flour bloom into perfect bread. And I could say thank you for loving me. For watching me dance. For forgiving perfectly that I was rich and you were poor. For letting me read the scriptures to you as you ate tortillas and beans. For believing, after all.

Review at Eight

I

Chapel halls become
strait path and narrow
way that calls to follow—
you, once-washed,
forgetful, errant and lost,
to refind your cleansing
here before the font.

II

One by one the children
come retracing steps as if
down banks of tamarisk
to timeless Jordan's edge.
Here once, in howling wilderness
of heart and mind, the Wholly Clean
in common water lay
course for ever-rising streams
that flow again to bear
the stains this journey grinds
into our days.

III

Witness here a cleansing
of the lambs,
spring white and waiting
for the world;
an arming of the guileless;
opening of eyes.
And sense again, fetid lives
enfolded here among the meek
who know no sin,
a gentle washing
of your innocence.

IV

You will remember
the quick descent,
rush of water,
hard-caught breath.
From a maze of private
compromise, of quiet
failure, tainted truths,
you will remember descent
and rush,
arms that held
through freshet surge,
that lay you down
and called you back,
water-washed and new.

V

This arm squared
sharp above the font
finds pattern in a rite
of arms:
high before Moriah's stone;
holy horn above young David's
head; twisted sinews stretched
across the Healer's Staff . . .
call acceptance
on sacrifice proffered
in water or in blood.

VI

Swept today
in the albine strength
that lays these children
in ritual dark, back
and down beneath liquid
folds of an ancient grave,
then draws out, secure again,
water-slick and gasping
like a new-born into light—
feel the Father's arms
that in a mystery of love
softly lower into death,
and then triumphant, lift again,
morning-slick and gasping
into life anew.

VII

There is a fountain
of pure water in borders
of the wilderness
where dawn breaks urgent
over surface of a simple pool—
across brain's right hemisphere,
baroque wordmaps, unsounded depths—
where far from errors
of Yours and Mine
we speak a Name,
and lift burdens so
sorrows will fall light.*

**Mosiah 18:30*

VIII

This patient cup He brings you,
sweet upon the lips
(how still the river,
how wide the wounds!)
invites to holy suppers,
calls again to hidden
fonts within.

E. Leon Chidester

E. Leon Chidester is from Cedar City, Utah, where he teaches Spanish at Southern Utah University. In addition to teaching, he enjoys writing, gardening, and spending time with his family. He has previously published in several other journals.

From the novel *Road to Covered Bridge*
by
Marilyn Brown

Synopsis of the novel *Road to Covered Bridge:* Early one morning, about ten hours before eleven-year-old Lindy Callister's family arrives at their new home in Utah, the owner of the Sinclair next door to their new house finds his wife face down in his irrigation culvert.

For Lindy it is the beginning of a new kind of consciousness: the funeral; the babysitter, Nancy, who locks Lindy in an outhouse to prepare her "oracle," which predicts only disasters; and her acquaintance with the half-Indian America Laughingheart, who heals with herbs, but cannot resolve the mystery of Emily Potter's disappearance from her grave. Potter's retarded boy Laman is one suspect for the murder, even though he does not accept his mother's death, but rather looks for her on the Haggarty porch in the form of a bird. For lack of evidence, however, the murder remains unresolved.

As the disasters continue—Grandmother Callister is struck by an exploding case of beans and Lindy falls out of a tree—the final blow to the family is Grandmother Callister's death. It is Lindy's grandfather, who, railing against the grave robbers and taking his wife's body away from this "place of unrest," ultimately outlines the final answers to the mysteries that all of them knew but were unwilling to make into words.

In this chapter, Lindy escapes the chaos of her home, seeking peace outside, only to find that the world is not a peaceful place.

The House Away From Home

Marilyn Brown

AFTER THE BEANS IN THE STORE HAD EXPLODED, SNAPPED UP, AND cut my grandmother's cheek, there seemed to be more than a necessary amount of confusion. I wanted out of the house. But my two little sisters were crying. My mother would not let me go.

As my grandmother lay on the couch, under the quilt with the trains on it, looking almost dead, I sat on the peach crate watching. Every breath she breathed reminded me that I was the one who heard the explosion in the storage space, and I was the one who found Grandmother sitting on the floor with beans in her eyes, beans in her hair, beans on the shelves and the ceiling, and blood dripping on her nylons cut up and snagged all along the sharp bones of her legs. Although I was only eleven and had nothing to do with it, my mother wanted me to "watch Grandma," to "listen for her breathing." And now I couldn't sleep, hearing her breathing hard in the night.

Finally, my mother let the half-Indian, America Laughingheart, come to help us because she had some herbs that would bring back my grandmother's strength. I was afraid, though, that America might say some-

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Marilyn Brown's novel, *Road to Covered Bridge*, is based on her own childhood in Provo, Utah. When she received her MFA in 1992, her thesis project at the University of Utah was the first-place winner of the 1991 Utah State Fine Arts Literature Competition, and the material for a series of regional author outreach (Tumblewords) readings recently performed in Idaho and Utah. One chapter of the novel appeared in Aspen's Book's *Christmas for the World*, and another will be included in the Tumblewords anthology out of New Mexico.

thing like, "How are you, Lindy? Did you tell your mother about our ride home from school the other day?"

But when she came into the house, she only looked at me and smiled. "How are you, Lindy?" she said.

My eyes darted to my mother and I didn't smile back. I had been sick in the lunchroom, when she had scooped up my vomit into a pudding mix box and taken me home in her horse cart. I hadn't told my mother about it.

"I'm fine," I said, watching my mother out of the corner of my eye. But she had not heard me, busy with Grandma Callister, propping a tea cup to her lips.

America opened up her leather bag. There were little cloth packs of tea. She took out one tied with a piece of yellow yarn. "Give her this one twice a day," she said. "She will heal quickly. It's skunk cabbage."

I wondered why she would give my grandmother something for skunks instead of for human beings.

"I am so sorry this has happened to Grandma Callister," America said. "This will help too." She took out a black powder. "Licorice root," she said. "Where is her husband these days? Was that him walking up and down the road several times a day before it began to snow?"

I thought she was talking to my mother and saying, "Where is your husband?" I thought she was asking about my father.

"He's in the war," I said. "He draws pictures of guns for ships."

"Grandpa," Mother said. "She's asking about Grandpa, Lindy."

"Oh," I said. I pulled my lips shut. I did not dangle my legs on the peach crate. I didn't look at Grandma anymore. But from under my bangs I couldn't keep my eyes off America Laughingheart's arms. They rolled and sagged like huge udders on a big cow. I breathed easier when she did not tattle on me, but she was telling something on Grandpa now.

"Before the snow came, he came by the graveyard and looked down into the graves they dug there. He was there when they found out Emily Potter's body was missing. Did he tell you?"

"Yes, he did," my mother said. Now the conversation was becoming even more confusing. "Have they found her?"

"Not yet. They believe someone buried her in Covered Bridge. They found her ring in a pawn shop, but it was the work of a fence. They suspect Laman Potter or the Stuart boys. Of course it will be impossible to find her if she has been buried somewhere in the canyon."

"Doesn't seem it's even safe to die around here," my mother said, "let alone live around here."

"Do you have any burdock growing in your yard?" America said.

"I don't know," my mother said.

What about Laman Potter or the Stuart boys? I wanted to ask, but didn't dare.

"You should take a formula I've compounded. There isn't enough sun in the winter to keep you from feeling low. The children should also take something to keep them well. When the snows really begin to fall after Christmas, there is nothing to do but stay inside."

"I take vitamins," my mother said.

"It's not enough," America said.

I watched my mother go through the teas from the leather bag. As she was picking through them, she asked a question about every one.

"My husband is coming for Christmas," Mother said. She was almost smiling.

I was sure this time she was talking about my father, but I didn't say anything.

"Can he stay?" America asked.

"No," my mother said.

"It would be best for all of you to be together. The children will languish in the heat here. Do you have central heat? Does it come through the floor here?"

I turned away from America. I was already what she said—languished. The talk crowded in my ears and slipped around like teeth grinding. I walked to the window. There was rain outside. I pushed the curtain away and looked out on the street. A man was driving a wagon across to the Haggartys.

"I'm going out now," I told my mother.

"Can't you stay, Lindy?" she said. "Stay with Grandmother while I fix dinner?"

"I'll sit with her," America said, looking at me. "The children should stay outdoors as much as possible in the winter." I looked at America. Under the floppy red straw hair, her dark eyes burned with a little pointed light. She winked at me. As if she had jerked a puppet string attached to the top of my spine, her smile rattled me up and down. I wanted to throw my arms around her and kiss her. But I didn't. I put on my coat and walked through the door quickly. I did not want Jessie or Sissy to follow me. I felt like a bird flying.

The rain was coming down in sheets. The sky was so black you could not see the sun. I ran across the street to avoid the trucks. There was so much water in the street that it shone like a river.

On the other side I walked swiftly north to the Haggartys. The man was out of the wagon and pulling something out from under a tarp. He was pulling and pulling. Finally he pulled so hard that whatever it was knocked him down. He sat up and rubbed his knees. He took the long package wrapped in newspaper up to the door. Tag Haggarty answered the door. Behind him stood his sister Lucinda. She saw me.

"Hi, Lindy," she said.

I waved.

"Do you want to see our new snakes?" she called out.

I walked up through the rain in the gutter. Everything was shining with water. The man walked ahead of me. Lucinda let him in and he carried the long package into the house.

"We're getting a snake tree," she said. The man disappeared into the house. Mrs. Haggarty stood and talked to him at the kitchen door. Then he disappeared.

"The snakes will eat the birds if we don't hang them on a tree," Lucinda said.

We walked through the same door. It was swinging and I stopped in front of it when it swung back toward me.

"It's all right," Lucinda said. "It's Laman. He made the tree."

Now I saw that Laman, Mr. Potter's son, was the man in the wagon. He made his way back to the back room. We trailed him through the kitchen, through the hall at the back to the dark recess of the porch. Mrs. Haggarty walked in front of him. Then she held the door so that he could come through. He dragged the snake tree, scraping the floor. The newspaper began to tear off and Lucinda bent over to pick up the pieces.

"We also have a monkey tree," she said. "But just a couple of monkeys."

I saw the back room for the first time. Outside the east windows that looked toward the mountain, the rain was pouring over the gutters, spilling down the glass. Inside, the heat made ribbons of steam. All along the south and north walls cages stood one on top of another. They were hooked to the walls, or stacked, or hanging from the ceiling. Hundreds of birds began to cry out. They were chattering or singing. The sound was deafening. I thought it would be impolite to put my hands over my ears. Lucinda and Tag were not doing it. They walked in and looked around.

Tag began scooping handfuls of grain out of a sack and letting some of it fall into the bird dishes hooked on the sides of the cages.

"The monkeys are the noisy ones," Lucinda said.

I could not tell the monkeys from the birds. Everything in the room seemed noisy to me. At the far end of the room Laman was setting up the tree. He pulled the newspaper away from it and reached inside the cage for the snakes. He pulled the first snake out and wrapped it around his neck.

"He does that all the time." Lucinda was watching me. She leaned over to my ear and shouted into it. "Did you know he was daft?"

I pulled away and looked at her. She was grinning. I thought I was losing my mind. I heard a lot of screaming behind me and her face looked like a clown's. The monkeys were screaming. Then Laman started screaming.

"One of these snakes has swallowed her," he was screaming. "One of these snakes swallowed her."

Lucinda ran to him and took the snake out of his hands. It looked long and slick. In the center of its body a large undigested lump rolled and bumped under its scales. "Hey," she said. "Leave Theory alone." She had the snake in her hands. She strung it out and all of us in the room watched the pulse of the lump inside the long gullet. "This is Theory," she said. "Don't you think she is gorgeous? Lots of times Laman has brought her mice, haven't you, Laman? He brings mice because he thinks his mother is one of these birds. He don't want the snake to eat any of these birds."

I looked around the room. There were hundreds of birds, all of them chattering. Mrs. Haggarty was at the door near the kitchen tightening the door of one of the cages with a screw driver.

"Theory hasn't got your mother," Lucinda said. "Laman, get your hands off her. This is the mouse you brought her a couple of days ago."

"When you girls want to come out in the kitchen, I just made a couple of muffins for you," Mrs. Haggarty said.

"I want some muffins," Laman said. "I want some muffins."

"He don't have any other place to go," Lucinda told me. "Do you know where he lives in Covered Bridge?"

"I saw the house," I said. It was a small white house hidden up against the hill on the other side of the covered bridge. I had been there once—our first day in town—when we went with my mother to pick up Mr. Potter's car so she could drive to the funeral. Jessica and I rode in the back of the truck. We rode past the Stuart house and I saw all the boys in the yard taking apart an old automobile. I saw their sister Nancy, who locked me in the outhouse, in the door with her red hair flying in the sun.

We got out and walked around and saw the ditch where Mr. Potter found his wife Emily's body with her hair fanning out in the water under the water beetles. We had seen a strange man peer from behind the barn. Mr. Potter said it was his son. It was this Laman, all right. I hadn't noticed him much.

I had needed to use Mr. Potter's bathroom and walked in the quiet house on the rug with the large roses and saw Mrs. Potter's picture sitting up on the dresser in the hall. She was wearing ice skates and smiling.

"Laman was living there until his mother died," Lucinda said. "Then he came here the next morning and we let him sleep in here on a piece of cloth. He believes she is here somewhere." She waved toward the birds. "Do you believe spirits stay around after they die?"

"I don't know," I said. "I think they might."

"There is some spirits can go live with God right away. But Laman thinks his mother did something no one should speak of. He can't tell us what she did. But he says she is still here. We try to let him be comfortable

here with the birds. He feeds them. We feed him and try to take care of him. But sometimes he disappears for days at a time."

Tag was pulling one of the bird dishes off one of the cages. The bird inside the cage popped through suddenly and he lashed out and spilled the grain out of the bird dish. When the dish fell to the floor, the bird pumped its wings and flew to the top of the window.

"Get down from there!" Tag screamed. "Get down from there, Lehi. Get your body off that bar!"

"The bird's name is Lehi?" I said.

"Yes," he said. "You heard that before?"

"No," I said, but I lied.

"The rest of these birds are named Nephi, Lemuel, and Sam. There's Noah and a couple of Almas."

I looked around the room. I thought the whole world was coming down on me, but then Mrs. Haggarty brought in the plate of blueberry muffins. They were large perplexing things, floury and lumpy with uneven veins of blueberries folded among crunchies. Lucinda and Tag concentrated on them as much as I did until their father came home and began rummaging in the bureau at the back of the bird room. He was telling Mrs. Haggarty something serious about his work.

"Bob's camera run out of film. And I think it leaks."

"Well, I'm not sure the camera's in that drawer," Mrs. Haggarty said.

Mr. Haggarty rifled through boxes of bird seed, fat rolls of butcher paper, and old newspapers.

"What you need that camera for?" Lucinda said.

"They found her shoe," Mr. Haggarty said. He took out some little pottery bird watering troughs, holding them in both hands. He set them out on the floor. There was no room on top of the bureau where two bird

cages sat with cockatoos looking over Mr. Haggarty's shoulder. "A white one."

"They found a white shoe?" Lucinda said, her eyes large.

"We can't dig now. It's starting to snow."

"Snowing up there in the canyon, is it?" Mrs. Haggarty asked. "It's just raining down here."

"Well, it's starting to snow big," Mr. Haggarty said, still rummaging in the drawer and not finding anything. "And you know what happens when it snows big. You can't find nothing. Nothing looks the same. You need photographs."

While he was taking things out of the drawers, the birds were screaming. The monkeys had climbed out on Tag's shoulders and they were walking back and forth across the back of his neck. He sat down on the floor and let the monkeys walk all over his ears and his hair. Something rattled outside against the window and I thought it was the snow. The steam was so thick on the windows you couldn't see anything.

"I thought that camera was in this drawer," Mr. Haggarty said.

Somebody knocked on the window, and Mrs. Haggarty looked up. "My goodness, who could that be?" she said, her hands still holding the plate where a couple of huge muffins still sat. She walked over to the north window. You couldn't see anyone. There was only a shadow outside the steam.

"Go around, Tag," Mr. Haggarty said.

"No, never mind. I think I know who that is," Mrs. Haggarty said.

Lucinda walked to the window and rubbed it with her hand. She made a big watery spot. "It's Nancy," she said.

"Why did you go over there?" Mrs. Haggarty said. "She saw you."

"Never mind. Go around, Tag," Mr. Haggarty said. "See what she wants.

Nancy was knocking on the glass.

"She has somebody with her," Lucinda said. "A baby."

I looked up. "What kind of baby?" I said.

"Looks like a little girl."

I walked to the window and looked out. Nancy had Sissy.

By now Tag was at the kitchen window. He refused to go around like his father said. He had opened the window and let the cold rain through. He was leaning up on the sink with the monkeys still in his hair and screaming out the crack in the open window.

"What do you want?" Tag was calling out.

By now I was right behind Tag. "She has my sister," I said.

"What are you doing with Lindy's sister?" Tag yelled.

I couldn't hear what Nancy said.

"I better go out there," I said.

"Stay here," Mrs. Haggarty said. "She can't mean much good."

"She says your sister was trying to cross the street and nearly got run over by a big truck," Tag said.

"It's really raining out there," I said. "I better go now."

"Suit yourself," Mrs. Haggarty said.

"Why is that bird out?" Mr. Haggarty was saying.

"Don't let anybody hurt that bird," Laman was crying.

"I wish somebody wouldn't move my camera," Mr. Haggarty was saying.

I slipped out of the door and around to the north side of the house where Nancy was standing by the kitchen window. I looked up and could still see Tag and the monkeys hidden behind the steamy glass.

Nancy was standing there in the rain holding Sissy's hand. Her wet hair streaked down her face. "You want your sister or not?" she said.

"Sissy!" I said. "What did you do? You came across the street alone!"

"She was coming after you," Nancy said. "She about got killed. A pie truck came down on her."

I kneeled down and held Sissy in my arms. She was trembling. It was getting colder. The wind was blowing the rain again. She didn't have any sweater on. Her diaper was soggy.

I looked at Nancy, Nancy looked at me.

"Did they tell you about the white shoe?" Nancy asked me.

I nodded.

"Well, did they tell you I was the one who found the shoe?"

I stared at Nancy. She was tall, and stood leaning her head back, which made her even taller.

"Oh," I said, shivering. The day we heard Rigby's voice in the barn, the moments we spent on the cemetery fence while Mrs. Potter's coffin sat on the side of her grave, every terrible move Nancy made toward whoever it was digging in the graveyard at midnight came back to me, and I backed away from her, even without thinking.

Now I was reminded how her voice sounded when she locked us in the outhouse the first day.

"So where are you going?" Nancy said.

"I don't know," I said. I took Sissy's hand. "Home. I'm going home, I guess."

CHARACTERS

Bishop: **He is a man in his late forties or early fifties. He is not yet completely comfortable with counseling.**

Rebecca: **She is a woman in her early or mid-twenties. She believes herself to be self-reliant. [The actress need not be—probably *should not* be—a glamour model type. In fact, overweight might be a good choice.]**

Rex: **Rebecca's older brother. He may appear onstage for his monologue, or appear in voice only. I would recommend onstage.**

SETTING

All of the action takes place in the bishop's office. There is a desk—wooden—with typical desk things on it: a blotter, a calendar, a phone, a pen and pencil set, a lamp, a note pad, a set of the Mormon standard works (scriptures), and other Mormon titles (*Jesus the Christ*, *The Articles of Faith*, *Approaching Zion*, etc.). All of the items on the desk are impeccably arranged. There are three chairs: a comfortable one be-

hind the desk and two wooden ones in front of the desk. No walls, no doors or windows. "Place" them, but don't use them, except when noted. And try to avoid pantomiming. The idea is to have as much dark space as possible around the tightly lit office space.

(Lights up. The BISHOP is kneeling at his desk, praying. Pause. He stands, goes to the door, looks out, steps out, steps back in, goes to the front of the desk and situates the two chairs that are facing each other. He sits in one of the chairs. He reaches across to the other chair, decides that it is too close and slides it away a couple of inches. He stands and goes to the door again to have a look around out in the hall. He steps in, looks at his watch and sits in the other chair in front of the desk. He checks the distance again.)

BISHOP: So, Sister Wells—No. Uh . . . *(Pause. He switches chairs.)* Well, Sister Wells—Shit. *(He stands and goes to the window, looks out, comes back to the desk and starts arranging things that are already perfectly arranged. He sits in the comfortable chair behind the desk and looks at his watch. REBECCA enters.)*

REBECCA: Hi, Bishop.

BISHOP: Hi. What are you doing here? *(He rises and goes to the door and looks out.)*

REBECCA: Uh . . . I, uh—

BISHOP: I have another appointment—if she ever shows up—What's up?

REBECCA: Well, I . . . I came to talk to you.

BISHOP: Well, as soon as I finish this appointment I'm going right home. Why don't you go keep your mother company 'til I get there. She'll probably feed you too.

REBECCA: Dad, I really— I— I re— I uh . . . need to talk to you.

(Pause.)

BISHOP: I have an appointment scheduled, I can't talk right now.

REBECCA: I know.

BISHOP: I don't think I'll be very long.

(Pause.)

Your mom, I'm sure, would love for you to stop by and visit.

(Pause.)

After I get home and finish my dinner, I'll go out in the den with you and we can talk.

REBECCA: No . . . That's all right.

BISHOP: Becky—

REBECCA Dad—

BISHOP: Rebecca, Rebecca. I know. I'm sorry.

(Pause.)

Will you wait for me?

REBECCA: Uh . . . mm. No.

BISHOP: Why?

REBECCA: Dad . . . I'm your appointment.

BISHOP: What? No, my appointment is with a new move-in. Uh, . . . a Carrie Wells.

REBECCA: I know. That's me.

BISHOP: I don't— Why?

REBECCA: I, uh—

BISHOP: What's wrong?

REBECCA: Noth—

BISHOP: Is your car all right?

REBECCA: Ye—

BISHOP: It's not acting up again, is it?

REBECCA: N—

BISHOP: I'm tired of fixing that thing.

REBECCA: There's—

BISHOP: One more thing goes wrong on that car and I'm junkin' it.

(Pause.)

REBECCA: The car is fine.

(Pause.)

BISHOP: Why did you make an appointment with a fake name?

REBECCA: I just—I didn't— I didn't want you to know it was me.

BISHOP: What do you mean?

REBECCA: I told Brother Heckman that my name was Kathy Wells and that I was going to be moving into the ward, and I wanted to talk to the bishop about a few things.

BISHOP: I know all that. Except for getting the first name wrong that's just about exactly what the note says that Brother Heckman gave me. But—

REBECCA: You have him well-trained then. He's almost perfect.

BISHOP (*Glaring:*) Why Beck—Rebecca? Why go to all this trouble?

(Pause.)

REBECCA: Because I need to talk to you.

BISHOP: I'm not that hard to find. I'm home almost all the time—you know that. You spend almost as much time at our house as you do at your apartment.

REBECCA: I know.

(Pause.)

BISHOP: So you didn't need— What is it you nee—? If you need to confess something, I'm not the one you should talk to. You should talk to your own bishop.

REBECCA: Dad—

BISHOP: That doesn't mean I won't talk to you about it, but if it *is* something serious like that, I'll counsel you to go to your bishop.

REBECCA: It's nothing like that, Dad. Not quite.

(Pause.)

BISHOP: Why did you go to all this trouble?

REBECCA: I didn't want to chicken out.

BISHOP: What?

REBECCA: I was afraid that . . . if I knew that you knew it was me—that was coming—your appointment, I might—I don't know. You'd cancel and say let's talk at home and I didn't want to talk to you there. I can't, I can't . . . uh . . . I have to talk to you here. It has to be here.

(Pause.)

All right?

BISHOP: Sure.

(Pause.)

Sit down. *(She sits in one of the chairs in front of the desk. He is standing behind the other. He hesitates a moment then pulls the other chair back against the "wall" (out of the way), then sits behind the desk. Pause.)* So, uh . . . what's up?

REBECCA (*Sigh:*) Mom says you're really getting into this bishop thing.

BISHOP: How do you mean?

REBECCA: I don't know. That— that you, you're really getting into it. You like it.

BISHOP: Oh yeah, it's great. Today the Relief Society President told me that there's a little group of ladies in the ward who have decided that I'm a hypocrite and a liar, and she pretty much agreed with them.

(Pause.)

REBECCA: What did you tell her?

BISHOP: Oh, you know. Something understanding.

(Pause.)

Well . . . so.

REBECCA: So.

BISHOP: So, what's up?

(Pause.)

REBECCA: Okay. *(Pause. He is letting her bring this out on her own.)*

This is not a confession . . . really. I mean, it is in a way—but, it's nothing I—I didn't do anything wrong.

(Pause.)

This is something I have to tell you, but I couldn't tell you—*can't* tell you as— . . . a daddy-daughter thing. It . . . uh . . .

(Pause.)

It's ea—I *thought* it would be easier in a sort of . . . counselor, uh, pa— uh, patient, uh— No.

(Pause.)

See— I've—I've already told *my* bishop, and my— uh, a therapist, and, uh . . . it's time— They both say that, uh, it's— uh . . . that I should tell you, but— I thought it would— Be easier . . . maybe . . . I can't tell— can't tell my *dad* . . . but . . . I c— I *can* tell another bishop. I don't think I'm making sense.

(Pause.)

BISHOP: Tell me what?

(*Long pause.*)

REBECCA: I was molested. When I was— . . . young—I was young. I was molested.

(Pause.)

BISHOP: By whom?

REBECCA: By Grampa.

BISHOP: My dad?

REBECCA: Uh-huh.

(Pause.)

BISHOP: Oh, that poor man.

REBECCA: Oh God.

BISHOP: What? *(He may stand at this point, but he will not yet leave the shelter of his desk.)*

What do y— uh. What do you wan—what do you nee—what do you want me to do?

(Pause.)

REBECCA: Nothing.

BISHOP: Becky— I'm sorry. I'm, uh . . . I don't— I wish I knew . . . wh— . . . what you need.

REBECCA: I need you to feel sorry for *me*.

(Pause.)

BISHOP: Yeah.

REBECCA: Yeah.

(Light change. Focus on REBECCA. REBECCA *turns away from the desk. She is now eight years old. Throughout this scene her clasped hands, or arms are unconsciously shielding her crotch.)*

BISHOP ***(In darkness:)*** Becky! Becky, Honey! Where are you? *(She appears not to have heard.)*

Becky! C'mon, it's time to go! *(Pause. As he enters the light:)*

Becky— What are you doing, Hon? Huh?

REBECCA: Nuthin'.

BISHOP: Well, we're going now, come on.

(Pause.)

Come on.

REBECCA: Huh-uh.

BISHOP: What do you mean, huh-uh?

REBECCA: I don't wanna go.

BISHOP: Why not?

REBECCA: 'Cause.

BISHOP: 'Cause why?

REBECCA: 'Cause.

BISHOP: Becky, everybody else is in the car. They're waiting. Let's go.

REBECCA: No.

BISHOP: Becky—

REBECCA: No!

BISHOP: Rebecca Anne, I am not going to take this kind of talk from you. Now—

REBECCA: I'm not going!

BISHOP: You little—.

(Pause.)

Becky, Grampa's gonna take you and Rex to A and W for dinner tonight. I think he'll even let you get a Mama Burger instead of a Baby Burger. How does that sound?

(Pause.)

I bet you he might even make you a Wingding for dessert. Wouldn't you like that?

REBECCA: No.

BISHOP: Sure you would.

REBECCA: Rex likes Wingdings. I don't.

BISHOP: What *do* you like?

(Pause.)

Huh? What would you like?

(Silence.)

Becky, you can't do this. You need to spend the night over at Grampa's and Gramma's tonight.

REBECCA: Why?

BISHOP: Your mother and I are going to the temple in the morning.

REBECCA: So?

BISHOP: We're leaving early, very early—

REBECCA: So?

BISHOP: And it'll be easier for us to leave straight for the temple without having to take you to Grampa's and Gramma's first.

REBECCA: I can get up early.

BISHOP: I know you can. But there's no reason we should wake up Grampa and Gramma so early. Now, come on, let's go. I told Grampa we'd have you there by six o'clock and we're already late.

REBECCA: No.

BISHOP (*Grabbing her arm and attempting to drag her out of the chair:*) I'm not going through this any more with you—we're going.

REBECCA (*Screaming:*) No! I won't go! I won't go! I won't go!

(The BISHOP spins her around and spanks her with one serious swat. She breaks away and runs to a corner of the light and faces her father. He follows and puts his face and a finger in her face.)

BISHOP: I'm not putting up with this any more, young lady! There is no reason for you to be acting this way. Now you get your butt out in that car or I'll give you the blistering of your life! Go! Now!

(She refuses to move. He reaches for her but she pulls away, screaming:)

REBECCA: No! Don't touch me! Please don't touch me! Don't make me go—don't make me go! I can't go! Please don't make me go. Please, Daddy?

(The BISHOP is stunned. Pause.)

BISHOP: Becky, Honey, what—?

(Pause.)

What's wrong? What's all this about?

REBECCA: Huh?

BISHOP: What are you so upset about, Sweetie?

REBECCA: I— I don't know.

(Pause.)

BISHOP: Becky, don't you like Grampa and Gramma any more?

(Pause.)

Huh?

REBECCA: Yeah. I like 'em.

BISHOP: Then what's the problem? I don't understand.

(Pause.)

You've never done this before, Becky. Why now?

(Pause.)

Why?

REBECCA: I don't know.

BISHOP: It's got to be something. What is it? Tell me.

(Pause.)

REBECCA: It's . . . it's . . . it's . . . it's always dark there.

BISHOP: What do you mean?

REBECCA: I mean, it's dark.

BISHOP: They have a lamp, Sweetie.

REBECCA: But it shines up.

BISHOP: I know, Hon. It makes it easier to see the TV, that's all.

REBECCA: It makes it dark. I don't like it.

BISHOP *(Sighs. Pause.)* Listen, Sweetie. Mommy and I are going to the temple in the morning and it's a long drive. We haven't been for a long time and we may not get a chance for another long time. We need to go. And we need to leave early. Now, I'm sorry we made these arrangements without consulting you first but I didn't think I had to. Will you help us out? It means a lot to your mommy and me.

(Pause.)

Maybe next time we can make different arrangements, but it's too late for that this time. Will you go?

(Pause.)

Please? For Daddy? Everything'll be all right. I promise.

(Pause.)

REBECCA *(Almost in tears:)* Uh-huh.

BISHOP: That's a girl. Now let's get in the car.

REBECCA: Okay.

BISHOP: You kids'll have a good time. You'll see.

(Pause.)

REBECCA: Okay.

BISHOP: Okay. Come on.

REBECCA: Coming.

(Light change. The BISHOP is seated. REBECCA may stand or sit. Pause. The BISHOP has pulled in a little.)

BISHOP: Uh . . .

(Pause.)

Why . . . ?

REBECCA: I don't know why. If he was still alive I guess we could ask him—.

BISHOP: That's not what I was . . . not what I meant.

REBECCA: What did you mean? Huh?

(Pause.)

Why did I let him?

BISHOP: No. No. I wasn't going to say that either. I'm sure there was probably nothing you could do about it . . . nothing.

REBECCA: Probably? Dad, what do you think? I had options? I was eight years old.

BISHOP: My God.

REBECCA: I had just become responsible for my own actions. I mean, I know it wasn't my fault that anything happened, and I sort of knew it then, but not really. He—.

BISHOP: Did he tell you it was your fault?

REBECCA: I don't want to talk about him.

(Pause.)

BISHOP: This is about him, isn't it?

REBECCA: No. It's about me.

BISHOP: Yes, it's about you, but it's about him too.

(Pause.)

And it's about me. And your mother.

REBECCA: Mom has nothing to do with this—

BISHOP: I'm sure she'll want to know. She'll want to help. She—

REBECCA: She knows. And you're right. But it's not *about* her. She knows that too.

BISHOP: Becky, we're a family.

REBECCA: Bullshit!

BISHOP: What do you mean, bullshit? We're a family, a good family. We stick together. We always stick together. We've had problems before, some of 'em big, but we've never fallen apart. We may not all live together any more, but we're still a family.

REBECCA: I know we're a—jeez, listen to you, you sound like a—

BISHOP: Like a what?

REBECCA: Like a soap opera— Dad, I know we're a family, that's not what I'm— What I'm saying is, so what? So what if we're a family? How does that—? How is that supposed to help?

BISHOP: The same way it's always helped—

REBECCA: How's that? How does the fact that I have parents and siblings help me?

BISHOP: Well . . . w— we love each other.

REBECCA: So?

BISHOP: So . . . we love each other.

REBECCA: *So what?* That's not go—that doesn't mak—it's not—it doesn't—it . . . Never mind.

BISHOP: Never mind? Never mind? What the hell is this? You come in here to tell me that my own father molested my daughter, but there's nothing I can do to help and then just walk out?

REBECCA: I knew you wouldn't get this.

BISHOP: Get what? What am I supposed to be getting?

REBECCA: Nothing.

BISHOP: Right.

REBECCA: I'm sorry I came.

BISHOP: Wait. Wait. Beck—Rebecca, wait.

(Pause.)

I'm sorry. But just let me explain how it looks . . . from here. From my point of view. My daughter, whom I see quite frequently at home, who watches my TV, eats at my table, washes her clothes in my machine, but rarely ever talks to me, I mean, really talks to me—

REBECCA: I talk to you—

BISHOP: You disagree with me. Let me finish.

(Pause.)

This daughter, of whom I begrudge none of this, comes in to my office because she wants to talk to me, but she can't, but she must, and then tells me that my father was a pedophile but she refuses to talk about it.

(Pause.)

What is it I'm not getting?

REBECCA: Nothing, Dad. You're right. I shouldn't have come.

BISHOP: But you *did* come. Why?

REBECCA: Mom said that we should talk. It sounded— she made it sound like a good idea.

BISHOP: Well, if your mother suggested it then it *is* a good idea.

(Pause.)

Did she say exactly what we should talk about?

REBECCA: Forget it, Dad. It's not a good idea. Not any more.

BISHOP: You know, when your mother and I finally got ourselves together enough to go to the temple to get sealed, our bishop gave us some excellent advice. And it came just in time. He said, "I know you two have been married five years already, but I'm going to give you the same advice I give all newlywed couples on their way to the altar." Then he looked at me and said, "Ray, I want you to promise me that you will do everything that Marcia asks you to do, because she will never ask you to do anything that won't make you a better person for having done it." And

he was right. I promised him, and I've kept my promise. I've bitched about it plenty of times, but I always do it.

(Pause.)

So, if your mother says we ought to talk, then we better do it.

REBECCA: Didn't he have any advice for Mom?

BISHOP: Yeah. "Marcia, everything you ask Ray to do, you ask sweetly, with a spoonful of sugar, because Ray has an ego the size of Nebraska, and it's very tender. You'll hurt it if you're not careful."

REBECCA: Sounds like—

BISHOP: Sounds like I'm hopeless without your mother. Well, it's true. Without her I'd be a bigger jerk than I already am. But I keep reminding myself that he gave the same advice to everybody. Which means, as far as he was concerned, in the world of men I'm not unique. We're all jerks.

(Pause. Even though she says nothing, somehow it's apparent that she agrees.)

So, let's try again. What do you want to talk about?

(Pause.)

Can I start?

(Pause.)

I'm sorry. I wish this awful thing had never happened to you. I wish my love for you *could* cancel it out.

(Pause.)

REBECCA: You know . . . you're right. I mean . . .

(Pause.)

You're right, we're a family, and in the past that's been important—don't— Don't interrupt me.

(Pause.)

What I mean, what I'm saying is . . . like the time I broke my foot. You took it very seriously, made sure we all did. Even Rex was nice to me. Got things for me and stuff and he never complained. He tried to get me to read a science fiction book and, even though I wouldn't do it, he was still nice to me. And Kelli, as young as she was, was very helpful. And you did that. You brought us all together.

(Pause.)

BISHOP: But?

REBECCA: But . . . that's not what this situation needs—

BISHOP: How can you say that?

REBECCA: —yet. Not yet.

BISHOP: Why? Can you tell me why?

REBECCA: Because I'm not ready for it.

BISHOP: You don't want our help?

REBECCA: What kind of help, Dad?

BISHOP: What?

REBECCA: What can you do? Huh? What can you actually *do*?

(Pause.)

BISHOP: I don't know, Becky. What can we do?

REBECCA: Right now? Nothing.

BISHOP: There has to be something we can do, some way we can support you through this.

REBECCA: I'm in a support group—

BISHOP (*shakes his head*) Strangers.

REBECCA: Not any more.

BISHOP: But they're just surrogates for us, and we're here. We can sit with you, we can cry with you—

REBECCA: I'm not crying.

BISHOP: You're on the verge. You have been since we started this thing.

REBECCA: "This thing?" See, Dad, that's just it. These tears are not because of Grampa. I stopped crying about that a long time ago. That pain is buried now. Right now I'm just pissed off.

BISHOP: Why?

REBECCA: Why? "This thing?" "This thing?"

BISHOP: Words, Becky. They're just words. Maybe they're the wrong words. To you. I call it a thing, it's a thing. What is it? What the hell is it? You better tell me the right words, Becky, 'cause, by God, I gotta get the words right!

(Pause.)

REBECCA (*Zero degrees celsius:*): Thing. It's a thing.

BISHOP (*As a sigh:*) Great.

(Stand off.)

When did you say it happened?

REBECCA: It started when I was eight.

BISHOP: Started?

REBECCA: It wasn't a one-time thing. It— It was . . . continual. Over a period of time.

BISHOP: How long?

REBECCA: Four years. Until I was twelve.

BISHOP: Twelve.

REBECCA: Mm-hm

BISHOP: When? I mean, how— how— . . . did he manage it? Where was ev— everybody? Where was I during all this?

REBECCA (*No build-up. All matter-of-fact:*) At home. At work. At church. In the next room.

BISHOP: Good Lord.

(Swallow.)

Why did he sto—what made him stop?

REBECCA: I did.

(Pause.)

BISHOP: How?

REBECCA: Mostly by just figuring out how to avoid him. Avoid his favorite situations. It wasn't easy. It came down to just saying "no."

(Pause.)

BISHOP: Why—

REBECCA: Because I didn't like it!

BISHOP: I meant— . . . why not . . . sooner—or later—or . . . why then?

(Pause.)

REBECCA: I was always trying. It took time. I guess when junior high was right there in front of me . . .

(Pause.)

I thought it would be a good time to change, start a new life.

(*Pause. This exchange has been even—low key. REBECCA looks away. Light change. Focus on REBECCA.*)

REX (*Who may appear or just be a voice:*): Hey Sis! How are *things*? Things here are pretty good for the most part. Anne auditioned for a play—a community theatre thing—and I think she'll get in which means I'll be home with the kids in the evenings. Good thing I finally finished school, wouldn't you say? (Not that it's done me any good.) Listen, I know this seems strange, getting a letter when I could just as easily call, but I want you to have a hard copy of this, and besides, getting a letter every once in a while is kind of fun, isn't it?

(Pause.)

The deal is this—I've been feeling bad about something for a long time and I want to apologize. I did something to you that I should have been shot for and I don't know if you even remember it at all. You've never mentioned it.

(Pause.)

Do you remember the first day of school when I was in the ninth grade and you were just starting junior high in the seventh grade? I'll bet you were scared spitless. Hell, when I started junior high I was scared for a week at least. I would have felt much better if there was a ninth grader, even just one, that I knew, that I could talk to in the hallways or something. Some kind of connection with the upper echelons so I wouldn't have to feel all alone as a lowly peagreen. But there wasn't anybody like that. I don't know if you thought of me that way, maybe I'm giving myself too much credit here, maybe you didn't care, or maybe it was something in between. I don't know.

(Pause.)

Anyway, that first day, I remember walking down the hall with a bunch of my buddies between the first and second periods, and just as we were passing the library I saw you coming the other way carrying a bunch of books and having a hard time with them I think. You looked up and saw me and started to smile and were just about to say something, and I gave you this look. I don't know how you understood so clearly what I meant, but I remember very distinctly thinking, "Don't talk to me, and don't ever acknowledge that you know me." It was a quick look, but before I looked away I noticed that your face went blank and then somebody knocked the books out of your hands but I ignored you . . . for the rest of the year. I never saw you again, at least, I don't remember ever seeing you at school again after that. Maybe it was you staying out of my way. The thing is, I had a great year. Ninth grade was something of a triumph for me, but we

won't go into that. And whether it's true or not, I feel like your first year in junior high probably sucked because I was such a jerk. But then, that's me giving myself too much credit again. I don't have an older brother, I don't know how younger siblings feel about us older brothers. Maybe your happiness at school didn't depend on me. I hope not. I did try to make it up to you three years later when I was a senior and you were just starting high school. I had figured out by then that I had been pretty cruel to you. I remember it took me a few minutes to convince you that I really did want you eat lunch with me and my friends. I'm glad you decided to join us. My senior year was a good year too, thanks, in part, to you. But I still feel like crap for the junior high thing, I hope you can forgive me. Even though you have never said anything about it, I'm pretty sure that I hurt you that day. I'm so sorry. Very, very sorry. Chalk it up to the fact that I was fourteen. It just occurs to me that I'm probably the reason you refuse to teach past the sixth grade. What can I say? You're right, all fourteen-year-old boys are idiots. I love you. Enlightenedly yours, Rex.

(Light change. Pause.)

BISHOP: I'm sorry, Rebecca. I guess I just don't know how to respond to this.

REBECCA: I thought bishops were endowed with special empathy powers.

BISHOP: We are.

(Pause. Is he kidding? She can't tell.)

But I'm not your bishop. I'm only your father.

REBECCA: So that let's you off the hook?

BISHOP: No, of course not, but—.

REBECCA: But what?

BISHOP: I don't know.

(Pause.)

I feel like I'm being crushed between two stones.

REBECCA: Dad, I'm the one who's the victim here.

BISHOP: I know that. But I'm a victim too, in a way.

REBECCA: How?

BISHOP: Between my daughter and my father?

REBECCA: What's the problem?

BISHOP: I . . . I . . . I can't believe you can't see this.

REBECCA: I'm your daughter.

BISHOP: I know that.

REBECCA: Do you love me?

BISHOP: Of course I do. What kind of a question is that?

REBECCA: An honest one.

BISHOP: What are you doing? Wh—wh-what's going on here?

REBECCA: I need to know where I stand with you.

BISHOP: Are you trying to force me into a choice here?

(Silence.)

I can't do that!

REBECCA: Why not?

BISHOP: Between the two of you?

REBECCA: Yes.

BISHOP: He was my father!

REBECCA: And I *am* your daughter! Right here! Right now!

BISHOP: I can't have you and him?

REBECCA: No.

(Pause.)

BISHOP: Becky, he raised me. He loved me. Despite what he may have done in later yea—

REBECCA: "May have done?"

BISHOP: Did do. I'm not doubting you. I believe everything you're telling me. Don't get the idea that I don't. I mean, I never could have imagined him doing anything like this, but now that it's put before me . . . it makes sense somehow.

(Pause.)

What I'm saying is, despite his having done this, and despite anything else he may have done, he was my father and I loved him my whole life. I did not experience what you experienced. Nothing like it even. Maybe, after I've had some time to . . . think about it, I'll make some connections. I'll see some things that he did to me in a different light, and maybe there won't be so much light there. Maybe I'll have had a darker childhood than I thought. But right now, I can't see it. Rebecca, my childhood was a happy one. It was normal. Pretty normal, anyway. My father was not a demon to me.

(Pause.)

Your grampa made magic out of Christmas. Twinkling lights and music, and a Santa Claus that I still believe in. He taught me to love trees and animals and to take time just . . . to go for a walk. I loved going to work with him and seeing how he supported us. Sometimes I even enjoyed helping him in the yard. It was all magic.

(Pause.)

I believe you, Rebecca. But my memories of my father are not your memories. And I can't just throw them away. I mean— Think about it, he's largely responsible for what I am today.

REBECCA: Then you better stay away from Rex's kids.

BISHOP: What?

REBECCA: So none of them get hurt like this.

BISHOP: It's a good thing you're over there and I'm over here.

REBECCA: Why? You wanna spank me, Daddy? You wanna slap my face? You wanna kick my ass? Come on! You've been hiding behind that desk long enough! Come on out here and face me! Or is it too cozy back there? Do you think I'm stupid? Do you think I didn't see what you did? Am I that frightening? Am I that repulsive to you that you have to pull the chair back and run and hide behind this—this—this . . . barricade? That's why I came *here*, Dad. To this office. I was hoping maybe I could get you to treat me like one of your flock, instead of an ugly little girl that you don't know how to talk to.

(*Pause. It takes a long time but eventually the BISHOP pushes in the comfy chair and comes out from behind his desk. He rearranges the two wooden chairs as he did at the beginning, but closer together this time.*)

BISHOP: Sit down.

(*She sits. He sits.*)

You're not ugly.

REBECCA: Yes I am.

BISHOP: No. You're not.

REBECCA: Dad, the only guy I ever dated was Rex. I never went to a prom, a Sadie Hawkins dance, a ward dance, a stake dance. The only dance I got at the Gold and Green Ball was with you.

BISHOP: Well, even though I don't quite know how to deal with this with *you*, I have learned a few things about this sort of situation with other people I've talked to. My uneducated guess would be that you may have something to do with that. You don't like men very much, do you? And you don't go out of your way to hide it either. Am I right?

REBECCA: It's more complicated than that, but it's sort of right. The point is, Dad, nobody even tried.

BISHOP: There was that one guy—

REBECCA: Chris was an idiot.

BISHOP: I know. Your mother and I were glad when you finally told him to get lost.

(*Pause.*)

Do you really hate your grampa all that much?

REBECCA: With every fiber of my being.

BISHOP: How can you hate somebody that much?

REBECCA: How could he do what he did?

(*Pause.*)

Dad, you will not get me to love him. Not anytime soon, anyway.

BISHOP: There's got to be some way—

REBECCA: Are you kidding? It practically killed me when you moved him into our house and made me help you take care of him.

BISHOP: You never—

REBECCA: That's probably the main reason I went on a mission.

(*Pause.*)

I prayed every night that he would die before I got home.

BISHOP: You prayed for that? How could you do that?

REBECCA: Think about it, Dad. At least he died comfortably. He didn't deserve it.

BISHOP: Rebecca—

REBECCA: He died sitting in a Lazy-boy rocker! He should've had a stone tied around his throat and thrown into the ocean!

BISHOP: I don't think—

REBECCA: Jesus said it, Dad! Jesus, the son of God, himself, said the very words. Only he called it a millstone.

(*Pause.*)

It's exactly what your father deserved.

(Pause.)

And you don't agree.

BISHOP (*A whisper:*) No.

(*Light change. Focus on the BISHOP. REBECCA remains in the darkness. The BISHOP picks up the receiver of the phone. Pause.*)

Hello. May I speak to Beck—Rebecc— uh . . . Sister Klein, please? Thank you.

(Pause.)

REBECCA (*In darkness:*) Hello?

BISHOP: Hi, Beck. How are you?

REBECCA: Dad?

BISHOP: Yeah.

REBECCA: What are you doing?

BISHOP: Well—

REBECCA: I mean, you're not supposed to call me. I could get in trouble for this.

BISHOP: You won't get into trouble. I called the Missionary Department. They told me to call your mission president. I called him and he said I could call you. Maybe I'll get into trouble with your companion, though. Did I wake her?

REBECCA: No. We've been up for awhile.

BISHOP: Good.

(Pause.)

REBECCA: Dad, this is a trans-atlantic call—what's going on?

BISHOP: Well . . .

(Pause.)

Uh, I thought you— I knew you wouldn't have wanted to wait a week or more to find out, so— I mean, that's why I called.

(Pause.)

REBECCA: What, Dad?

BISHOP: Your grampa died.

(Pause.)

REBECCA: I'm sorry.

BISHOP: Well, we knew it would happen soon—that it was coming.

REBECCA: When did he die?

BISHOP: This morning. Well, yesterday. Technically it was yesterday.

REBECCA: Mm-hm.

(Pause.)

BISHOP: He, uh . . . well, he died sitting in his chair, and . . . and . . . he died comfortably—not in his sleep—but, there was no, uh . . . uh . . . one minute he was here and the next minute he wasn't.

(Pause.)

Your mother found him. It was after breakfast. She called me at work, and— I got the rest of the day off and came home. Uh . . .

(Pause.)

I, uh . . . I called Uncle Kent and Uncle Randy and told them. They both took it pretty well. Uncle Randy was a little more upset because, I think, because he . . . well, he's so far away and didn't get to see Dad very much these last few years. Kelli knows, of course. She was upset, but she's all right now. I called Rex and told him. He took it well, but I told him not to worry about coming home for the funeral. He— he'd miss too much school. Besides, he's never liked funerals. I think he thinks they're a waste of time.

(Pause.)

REBECCA: Uh-huh.

BISHOP: And, uh . . .

(Pause.)

REBECCA: Do you want me to come home for the funeral?

BISHOP: No. No, of course not. The missionary committee already told me that you could come home if you wanted to . . . but that if you did, you wouldn't be able to go back into the field.

REBECCA: I'm only— I've only got a couple months before I come home—

BISHOP: I know—

REBECCA: —and I'm right in the middle of some important work.

BISHOP: No—I—I understand. I wasn't going to ask you to come home.

(Pause.)

I called because . . . I know how much you love your grampa, how much he meant to you. I knew you'd want to know right away instead of waiting for the mail.

(Pause.)

REBECCA: Thanks.

(Pause. Light change. The BISHOP hangs up. Pause.)

I don't love Grampa, Dad. I haven't loved him for a long time. Not since I was eight.

(Pause.)

BISHOP: I don't know what to say.

REBECCA: Figures.

BISHOP: I mean, I don't know what to say to *you*. I don't know what you want to hear, what you *want* me to say. Wh— uh, wh . . . what's the proper response here? What do you want me to say?

REBECCA: I don't *want* you to say anything.

BISHOP: Bullshit. Why else did you come here? Just to tell me that it happened? Well, you've told me, thank you very much, and if that's it, then . . . see ya. Good bye. Adios.

(She won't move. Stand off.)

What? What? What do you want?

REBECCA *(This is on-the-edge desperate. She is ready either to implode, or explode. One way or the other doesn't matter. It's the actress's choice.)* I don't *want* anything, Daddy. It's what I need.

(Pause. The "Daddy" sort of startles him.)

BISHOP: What do you need, then?

(Pause. He wants to ask again, but he waits.)

REBECCA: An apology.

BISHOP: You want me to say I'm sorry? I'm sorry. I'm so very, very sorry. But Grampa's the one who owes you the apology. He's not here.

REBECCA: No. You.

BISHOP: Me what?

(Pause.)

You need an apology from me?

(She nods.)

Why? W— uh, w . . . what for?

(She appears frightened. This scene mirrors the end of the first flashback.)

Becky, I didn't do anything. I n—never— I— I never hurt you . . . like that. What are you saying? What are you saying?

(Pause.)

Are you accusing me of something?

REBECCA: No.

BISHOP: What then? How did I become the bad guy?

(Pause.)

REBECCA: You let it happen.

(Pause.)

BISHOP: I didn't know. Becky, I *didn't* know. How could I have stopped it?

REBECCA: I don't know.

BISHOP: You expected me to stop it?

REBECCA: I wanted you to.

BISHOP: But I couldn't. How can you blame me for this? How can you hold me responsible? I didn't do anything wrong.

REBECCA: You said it would be all right! You said *everything* would be all right! You promised—

BISHOP: —When? When did I say that?—

REBECCA: —You said it! You said it! You said, "Everything'll be all right. I promise. Everything'll—

BISHOP: —I never said that—

REBECCA: "Daddy and Mommy are going to the temple. We're going to the temple and you have to go to Grampa's. You have to go. Please? For Daddy? Will you go for Daddy?—"

BISHOP: —What—

REBECCA: "You kids'll have a good time, you'll see, I promise—

BISHOP: —What are you talking about?—

REBECCA: —"We need to go to the temple—it means a lot to your mother and me—please?—please, for Daddy?—yes, Daddy, I'll go, I'll go—that's my girl—you kids'll have a good time, a good time—everything'll be all right, I promise, I promise—yes Daddy—.

(Pause.)

You promised.

(Pause.)

BISHOP: Oh my God.

(Pause.)

I'm sorry. Oh, dear God, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Please forgive me. Please. Please.

(Pause.)

Please forgive me.

(Pause.)

REBECCA: Doesn't matter.

BISHOP: What? What doesn't matter?

REBECCA: Doesn't matter. Doesn't change anything.

BISHOP: Becky, let me do s— let me make it up to you somehow, let me—

REBECCA: You can't. You *can't* make it up to me. You *can't* change it—you *can't*—I thought—I thought you could, but you can't, you can't. I thought I could make you see, make you— apologize. And it would— everything would— But it doesn't matter— it doesn't . . . change anything. It's all the same. Everything's still the same.

BISHOP: What's the same?

REBECCA: You still love him!

BISHOP: Yes, I do. Jesus loves—

REBECCA: But, I don't—I can't—I don't love—

BISHOP: I love you too—

REBECCA: Well, *I* don't! I mean— I mean . . . you can't— it, it doesn't matter. It doesn't help. It doesn't help *me*.

BISHOP: How can it not?

REBECCA: Dad, what happened to me? Do you understand what happened to me?

BISHOP: I think so.

REBECCA: But do you understand what it has *done* to me? What it has *meant* to me?

BISHOP: Not yet—

REBECCA: Never, Dad! You will never know—you will never understand.

BISHOP: How do you know that?

REBECCA: In order for you to understand you'll have to see things from where I'm at. You'll have to hate your father the way I hate him. How are you going to manage that? How are you going to develop that kind of hate?

BISHOP: I don't—

REBECCA: You'd have to know what he did. You'd have to've experienced it yourself, or you'd have to know what he did to *me*. You'd have to let me tell you what he did, let me describe every sickening detail. Do you want to hear that, Dad? Do you want me to describe for you exactly what he did to me with his fingers? With his tongue? Do you want me to describe how he violated me with his penis? How he—

BISHOP: No.

(Pause.)

No. I don't.

REBECCA: I didn't think so.

(Pause.)

I wasted your time, Dad. I'm sorry. I'll see ya.

BISHOP: Becky. Becky, wait a minute. Please wait.

(Pause. She is waiting.)

Can we talk again sometime?

REBECCA: Dad—

BISHOP: Please . . . Rebecca.

(Pause.)

Maybe not soon, but . . . sometime . . . we need to talk about this again. All right?

REBECCA: I don't know.

BISHOP: Please.

(Pause.)

REBECCA: All right.

BISHOP: Thank you. And not here. Not in this office. At home. As your father.

(Pause.)

REBECCA: All right.

BISHOP: Okay.

(Pause.)

Gonna stop by and . . . see your mom for a bit?

REBECCA: No. I think I'll go right home.

BISHOP: All right. Drive safely.

REBECCA: I will. *(Pause. REBECCA moves toward the door. Pause.)* Dad . . . I've— *(Long pause. She's been fighting this truth all evening.)* I've never hated Grandpa. That's what made it so— I've never hated him. I've only wished that I could. *(Whispered:)* G'night.

(REBECCA exits. The BISHOP stands in the middle of the room for a while, unfocused. Suddenly, the part of him that is away, returns, and he whispers:)

BISHOP: G'night.

(He sits. He stares. And finally he weeps. Lights out.)

J. Scott Bronson

Confessions was a winner of the first Sunstone Mormon One-act Play Contest and was first performed as a public reading at the Sunstone Symposium in Salt Lake City, August 20, 1994, with the following cast:

Bishop	Ivan Crosland
Rebecca	Jennifer Erekson
Rex	D. William Shunn
Narrator	J. Scott Bronson

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Scott was raised in San Diego but now lives in Orem, Utah, with one wife, four children, an apple tree, and a cherry tree. He served a mission to Indonesia and Georgia (the state). (Don't ask.) He writes fiction as Scott Everett Bronson—yet to be published—and has appeared in several television movies. Scott loves to read science fiction, nature books, mainstream novels, plays, the classics, scriptures and *Smithsonian Magazine*. He also loves the ocean, egg nog, and rock-n-roll. And jazz. And classical. Etc.

An Interview with JOHN BENNION

WR: When did you first see yourself as a writer?

Bennion: Well, it's funny, I've always felt like a writer, but I didn't always write. I guess I wrote in school, but I don't remember much about that kind of writing. My cousins and I spent a lot of time in the desert west of Vernon on my father's and grandfather's ranches when we were teenagers. We wrote doggerel on paper bags or toilet paper, most of them obscene, about peeing out the cabin door in the sunrise or the Swedish girls who lived in Vernon or the ballad of the fropes, weird animals that

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John, one of the advisors of the *Wasatch Review International*, is the author of numerous short stories, one novel, *The Burial Pool*, which is currently out to publishers, and a collection of short stories, *Breeding Leah*. He has published in *Dialogue*, *The Best of the West 2*, *Sunstone*, *BYU Studies*, and *Ascent*. A teacher at BYU in the English department, Dr. Bennion obtained his Ph.D in creative writing from the University of Houston. He and his wife, Karla, and their five children live in Springville, Utah.

eat skunk manure and generate spontaneously from liver soaked in brine. Half of them had to do with girls.

Although I thought of myself as a writer of stories, in high school I planned on becoming a scientist. Then in my senior year I had a wonderful AP English teacher. He changed my direction. As an undergraduate student at BYU, I took a class from Doug Thayer, Introduction to Literature. He gave me Ds my first semester—it was my upbringing in rural Utah afflicting me. I hadn't really written, except what I had written on paper bags and toilet paper, and I was a bad writer. Gradually I moved up to Bs. When I told him I was interested in writing, he recommended the short stories of Ernest Hemingway and Sherwood Anderson's *Winesberg Ohio* and I read those two quite a bit. Their language has become a part of my neurons. In fact, I think Hemingway was too important because now I have trouble writing in anything but the plain style. So if a narrator or character wants to speak more eloquently, I have trouble. My writing has to be flat and dry. And while that can be good—because what I write about mostly is the desert (shouldn't writing about the desert be flat and dry?)—it can also be a problem.

WR: Speaking of problems that you encounter in writing, what is the great challenge that faces you as a writer when you sit down at your computer?

Bennion: The hardest thing is the hardest every time—the job of imagining myself into someone's else's head. When I'm writing I feel that I've been spun out of my own head and I'm residing in someone else's. For me, it's an intensely Christian experience, seeing through someone else's eyes. One of my first stories, "The Interview," is about a homosexual man meeting with his stake president for a marriage interview. When I was a freshman at BYU, I met someone who was homosexual. He didn't tell me so at the time, I found out later. His therapists tried to convince him that he wasn't homosexual, that he was just confused. They sent him through

some weird activities that ended up in the story. Finally—I was on my mission at the time—he gave up on it all. It felt false to him and he realized that it wasn't working. He's been living with a partner now for 15 years or longer. Anyway, I took his experiences and created a character, and imagined myself into that peculiar character. I could tell I'd imagined well, because when I sent it to *Dialogue*, one of their readers wrote that if the story was autobiographical, my effort to make it fiction was clouding it. I should just tell it in the first person (although anonymously). It was a compliment because their reaction meant that the core of the story seemed real to them. But because I was teaching middle school at the time, I put it in my drawer for several years. Some imaginings are so real that people judge you for them. But to me it felt like an act of charity, to imagine every impulse from that person's viewpoint.

To write another story, "Jenny, Captured by the Mormons," I imagined myself into the head of a woman whose Mormon husband has abandoned her—he thinks he's one of the prophets spoken of in the Book of Revelation. To provide for herself and her children, she's become a con-artist. Some days she panhandles on Temple Square, others she works Church and governmental welfare. She once sold the members of her ward white corn flour, telling them that it was discovered in a Jaredite cave in Mexico, and that it would help them live longer than a hundred years. After I finished the story, a woman who had lived on the street asked me where I got all my ideas, meaning my tactics for "working" people for money. I was highly complimented because I'd cooked them all up in my fevered brain.

WR: A lot of your writing deals with sexual tension between a man and woman. Why is that?

Bennion: It's of universal concern to people. I've always been fascinated by sexuality. As a teenager, I was (and still am) tremendously shy.

As a consequence, my friendships with young women were rocky or imagined. Relationships never became as romantic as I thought they should. Maybe that's why I'm interested in this sexual tension—for the kind of reason that some people become psychologists, they want to work out some personal problem.

In this I'm like Thomas Hardy. Only in my dreams could I be as good a writer as he is, but like me, he writes about human sexuality. He works that subject in every novel. For example, Tess is destroyed by her and her culture's tangled ideas of sexuality. She's had sex with a man before, so her new lover won't have her because she's spoiled.

Fiction needs to be written about human sexuality. In *Winesberg Ohio*, Sherwood Anderson describes a woman who has some deep troubles, and he says there will have to be a lot of careful books written about women like her. Sexuality is so complex and has so much natural tension in it, there's a good opportunity in it for fiction. Careful books need to be written.

Despite my main interest, all troublesome relations are fodder for writing, not just male-female relations. My father was an alcoholic and it drove me crazy when I was a teenager. Several times I tried to approach him but he wouldn't let me. (How would it be for a self-righteous child to discover your secrets, tell you how to act?) Before my mission, he said he'd stop, but it wasn't something he could do. I didn't understand that at all at the time, I thought he was a sinner. Because I was ashamed of him, I worked on father/son relations in my fiction. All of the stories in my master's thesis are father/son stories where I try to come to terms with my own father. One is about the son of an overbearing father who is left in the desert to take care of a pump engine. The engine overheats. The boy should have heard the change in the sound of the engine when it overheated or he should have kept the leaky radiator filled with water, but he didn't. He ruins the engine. In the story he's waiting in the desert for his

father to come back, and he knows it's going to be like God coming down on him. I wrote about Abraham taking Isaac up the mountain, about a father and a son trapped in a snow storm, and about a son lying to his father about the son's dog, which has been killing sheep.

WR: You said that getting out of Utah, getting some distance on your material, was one of the best things that happened to you as a writer.

Bennion: Just getting away from Utah helped me to see my material, my growing up as a Mormon in a desert town, as something unique. When something is too close to you, it isn't interesting and you can't see it. I love living in Utah now, but I had to get away to discover myself through the eyes of my friends and teachers at the University of Houston.

WR: What do you try to do for your students? You can't get them out of Utah.

Bennion: Many of them don't come from Utah. A student from Maryland can teach a student from Utah something about her culture. The same is true in reverse; the student from Maryland can learn something here. In terms of the environment in Utah, the mountains and the desert, I try to get students to look at it longer. I teach a wilderness writing class and one activity is for the students to sit and observe. If they look at some natural scene long enough, it's transformed. The same is true of objects or people—watched they become unfamiliar. My fiction is based on something bizarre, unhappy, or evil working under the surface. If you look at your own life long enough, something foreign and frightening comes up. The metaphor of the desert fits. The desert gives the illusion of being quiet, no movement, but if you watch long enough you'll see a rattlesnake or scorpion you could have stepped on.

To explore their own lives, at the beginning of each class I have students write a 3,000 word personal narrative. Carol Bly, author of The Passionate Accurate Story says that this activity flushes the personal material out. Students get rid of it so they don't write egotistically anymore, but I also find that these narratives often have cracks and gaps in them, contradictions and omissions that make material for essays and fiction.

I also have students play "What if?"—that game central to writers. You've got a young man talking to his stake president? What if he's gay? What if he's thinking about getting married to a good woman he's met? To me the game of "What if?" is the whole pleasure of writing fiction. What if there's a missionary who falls in love with one of his contacts? What does that make him think about God? Does he think God's playing tricks on him? What if he starts feeling that God has singled out this woman for him—like in *Saturday's Warrior*—that this has been arranged for him by God? The result is that the act of falling in love starts him wondering, and the character himself starts playing "What if?" Then what if he has sex with her? In the first drafts of my novel, *The Burial Pool*, I didn't let this missionary play with that possibility. But for me there was no story.

WR: Let's take for example someone who has something valid to say about his experience in the LDS church. He joined the Church as a young man, had some negative experiences, then left. He wants to write, but can't play the "what if" game. He can't say, "What if the bishop who did such-and-such was really doing the right thing?" Or "What if I'm wrong?" How can this writer get around this inability to do the "what if"?

Bennion: First off, the "what if's" are severely limited if you don't love people and if your love for people isn't growing. Your preconceptions restrict the free play of characters in action. One of the changes from Thomas Hardy's early novels to his later work is that his comprehension

of his characters changed. His early depictions of women and men are shallow and stereotypical. Then he experienced pain in his life, and his comprehension of his characters, his love for them, grew. The mayor of Castorbridge is not very likable, but the reader likes him because Hardy does. In his real life Hardy and his wife were very cruel to each other, but in his fiction his "what if's" grew wider and wider. That's an odd irony. He may have been more in love with his fictional characters, like Tess or Eustacia Vye, than with his wife. His great power was to feel something for a character and then release that feeling, enabling his narrative imagination to take over. That's the act of fiction—to imagine yourself into a character's head, but then to release her to be what she is. You love her life, even if her life is evil; you see her reasons for being that way and you love her. A Mormon writer who is angry all the time, either at outsider characters or insiders, can't achieve the kind of balance Hardy did. Anger is a good emotion to begin with but the act of writing has to bring it back into control.

Don D. Walker said there are two problems with Mormon writers: some people are so fully in the Church they can't see what they are writing about—everything's all sweetness and light—while others are so far out that they can't see the structure of the Church and the tradition of the Church as a valid ground for tension. William Mulder suggested that a writer has to be both inside and outside. But how can someone be outside and inside at the same time? If you're outside enough to offer social satire or criticism, it's often seen as an attack on the church. One of the things Shakespeare did in his plays was to offer gentle criticism toward the monarchy, but his instruction was buried in his pleasurable triple-level stories. I can imagine the Queen watching those plays and being happy even as she was criticized. We need more Shakespeares. I think there's a lot of room for humor in Mormon writing, ways of poking fun at ourselves, at

our serious ways. We need to laugh at things. As Chieko Okazaki says, we need to lighten up.

WR: Are there ways that good Mormon fiction should be different from literature in general?

Bennion: I think it would have its unique stamp. Our uniqueness lies in the tension between obedience and free agency. Our stories can be quite spiritual, but spirituality is not avoiding conflict. Many of our stories have the fear and true opposition taken out of them. Such stories don't teach us how to become stronger spiritually. They have all the beautiful ambiguity taken out of them. They might as well be preachments because they only teach precepts. We need more stories that teach us how to wrestle with spiritual ambiguity.

Mormon writers have looked to the stories of Flannery O'Connor for a model, but we can look other places for ideas of how to create spiritual tension. In his *Sickness unto Death*, Soren Kirkegaard says that true Christians should be frightened not of physical pain or death, but of spiritual pain or death—the second death, he calls it. In order for a Mormon character to be challenged, really to go through anguish, a writer can't avoid sin. You have to have a boy struggling with hatred, real murderous anger, as the character does in Doug Thayer's *Summer Fire*. Or you have a girl struggling with her own sexuality and with her father's faithful bigotry, as in Margaret Young's "Outsiders." You have to have good people falling into sin.

In order to write this kind of fiction the author has to know both insider and outsider perspectives, be able to describe both faithful people and rebels with equal sympathy. I think that's why I'm interested in what Margaret Young's doing. She's writing this kind of double perspective literature. In *Salvador* you find serious criticism of the excesses of western and

Mormon culture. At the same time you have a story about spiritual discernment, not seeing with the eye of the flesh.

Isaac Bashevis Singer had the same problem as Mormon writers do—trying to write a complex spiritual angle. His characters seem weird—superstitious clowns—but he doesn't think of them that way. He uses the oddness of his culture—goblins, demons, and angels. When we talk to non-Mormons we try to push our oddness under the rug: polygamy, the three Nephites, the fact that we know the location of heaven, or the feeling that you can make the decisions based on a gift that comes and leaves and is not rational and has nothing to do with rationality. None of these things are weird for us, but if you imagine an outsider perspective, you realize we are really quite peculiar. Levi Peterson is one writer who does for Mormon literature what Singer does for Yiddish.

I believe that we can write nationally recognized fiction that has the stamp of Mormon spirituality. An institute teacher once told me that it's impossible to effectively record spiritual experiences. The act of writing always changes them. You try to write them and they come out funny, weird. In a rational medium, they become comic. But we need to try.

WR: In addition to writing about spiritual matters in a "rational medium," are there other problems Mormons face in writing?

Bennion: People talk about the glass ceiling with women. Well, we have a glass ceiling against dealing with serious theological questions and sexuality. We're not supposed to even talk about these things. My own weak spot is that I get angry at that ceiling, so I think, I'm going to violate that ceiling every chance I get. I put all kinds of artificial, subversive, or angry or radical things in there that don't naturally belong in the story—direct sexual description, abuse, women wanting the priesthood. Then I have trouble making the story balanced. Right now I'm writing about a woman who has a deep natural feeling which prompts her to give

blessings in her ward, priesthood blessings. I find myself putting in every current subject about women's liberation and it really doesn't fit, and it makes the material I'm working trendy.

WR: So you're not writing to make a political statement?

Bennion: I don't mind making a political statement, but if I go overboard, my material doesn't quite fit the story, which is the bottom line. It's hard to find a balance when you feel like you are repressed. Maybe I'm not repressed. But there's that feeling and I go overboard to try to exceed some imaginary watchdog's expectation.

WR: So what else would you like to see happen in Mormon literature?

Bennion: We talked about the two camps—serious, academic, philosophical outsider fiction and popular fiction. It would be interesting if there were more in the middle.

I recently gave a paper about the separate roles of rationalist and faithful fiction for an Association for Mormon Letters meeting. Can those two exist side-by-side in the same culture? I hope so because I believe that there's a purpose for each one.

I think faithful fiction strengthens our identity as a people. Through portraying characters who are heroic, not doubtful and divided, it helps us hear the voice of the tribe. Jack Weyland writes this kind of fiction. His fiction is designed to teach young people how to chart their way past serious challenges: death of loved ones, drug addiction, sexual abuse. His map is always sure, but his characters aren't allowed to really wrestle. No main character or reader can be exposed to real despair. His characters always make it back home. The girl in *Stephanie* is a drug addict, a serious problem, but he doesn't just take her from drug addiction to beginning recovery. By the end of the book she's getting married in the temple after

everything she's gone through. That kind of progress in such a short time is unrealistic, but it still serves an important purpose. If Stephanie can become perfect inside one book, a reader can have hope. Maybe it's not a realistic hope, but if you are completely rational and realistic, it's hard to have hope.

I want to save a place in my life and my children's life for this kind of story and also, the faith-promoting stories that our culture treasures—for example the story about the young men who sacrificed their lives to help the members of a pioneer company cross a frozen river. But in addition to faithful stories we need others, like Abraham taking Isaac up the mountain—tough, paradoxical, ambiguous stories. This kind of story stretches our limits, makes us welcome the stranger and his strange stories, as Bruce Jorgensen puts it. We need both faithful fiction and humanistic, rationalistic, and testimony stretching forms of fiction.

WR: Do you think we are achieving some success in Mormon literature, and who do you see as writers having done this? You mentioned Chieko Okazaki. I read her books as personal narrative and they were beautifully done. If she had the time, I think she could write and contribute a lot to Mormon literature.

Bennion: She's wonderful. She's revitalized my own religion for me, made me alive again. She's astonishing. She had hard times and doesn't try to hide it. She overcame the hard times and talks about them. She doesn't speak respectfully of someone who uses power incorrectly, even if it's social power, not some kind of religious or political power. To answer your first question, many writers are using Mormon material and publishing in the national market. Walter Kirn, Darrell Spencer, Brian Evanson, and Phillis Barber are just four.

WR: Any last words?

Bennion: Writing has been like a university in Christian humanism to me. What's happened to me, as I've been writing this last novel for about ten years, is not the discovery of abstractions or principles but of the treasure of minute details and individual perspectives. I've banged heads with my characters, over and over and over again, until my real head and their imaginary one are both broken, rehealed, transformed. In my novel, I ask myself, Why would a missionary jump off a plane and run back and have sex with his contact? Why would he throw his life away? It's been fascinating research.

Through all this process, my wife, Karla, who is the most sensible, stable, wise person I know, reads my novel and says, "What is this, a male fantasy?" so I go back to it and try to get more fully into the characters' mind. I find out how *their* eyes see and *their* body moves. I focus on how a singular man relates to a particular woman. I've learned sentence by sentence how to give up my vested interest enough to see the universe from someone else's perspective.

Book Review

"The Paradox of Salvation." *A review of* She Needed Me, *by Walter Kirn (New York: Pocket Books, 1992, Hard cover $20 U.S.) Reviewed by Valerie Holladay, associate editor of the* Wasatch Review International.

Unlike My *Hard Bargain*, Kirn's collection of short stories, his novel does not deal with Mormonism, nor with the Mormon culture. Then why this review in a Mormon literary journal? *She Needed Me* is about playing God—sincerely, wholeheartedly, vainly—and learning how far short we fall when we try. It is about the temptation we may have to *save* people, rather than to *love* them. And yet, paradoxically, it is through Weaver's attempt to save Kim that he understands how human and imperfect he is, and, in turn, the more human he becomes. A process similar to that taught by Jesus: that by losing ourselves in service, the more there is of us to find.

Kirn takes on a complex moral, political, and religious dilemma in a deceptively simple beginning:

We met outside an abortion clinic.

The girl was standing up, about to walk inside.

I was in front of her, lying down. (p. 1)

Weaver Walquiest, a born-again Christian and a member of the "Conscience Squad," is the central figure of Walter Kirn's first novel, *She Needed Me*. Pam Houston describes Weaver as "gentle, misguided and convincingly paralyzed by the fear of letting anyone into his life." Weaver

is a masterful creation, a character who is rigid, intolerant, even fanatically blind, who nevertheless invites our sympathy. Says Weaver of his childhood: "Maybe all children feel as small as I did, as if they might just fall in and disappear while sitting on a parent's lap." He finds that stolen bottles of vodka from his mother's liquor store help combat the feelings of being small. Drugs helped, too. "Having feelings you can't describe and having them often, makes you lonely. Getting stoned made me lonely, but getting more stoned made it seem all right."

As Weaver grows older, his mother encourages him to "broaden his horizons," but Weaver resists the woman he calls "my mother the businesswoman." "I did not want my horizons broadened," he says. "I knew that the broader they got, the smaller I would feel, and I felt small enough already."

Through religion, Weaver finds security. "I was not raised religious," he says. He is introduced to the power of religion when he is saved by Lucas Boone when Lucas finds Weaver lying on the floor of a Greyhound stration choking on his vomit and pain pills. When Weaver is baptized, he is amazed and grateful to be "a whole new human." By the time Weaver meets Kim, he is a salesman for Sanipure, a Christian corporation based in Ohio that purchases soaps and beauty products from leading manufacturers and distributes the product after placing a cross-shaped label on them.

Weaver, a vigilant Christian, is supremely conscious of his duty to save the unborn children who are threatened by abortion-seeking mothers. He is devoted to the "Conscience Squad" leader, Lukas Boone, "a veteran of the Navy Seals who had given his soul to the Lord of Hosts during an arctic training exercise."

It is outside of an abortion clinic in St. Paul, Minnesota that Weaver meets Kim Lindgren. Kim is 23 and pregnant and friendless.

"I'll help you," I said. "There are counselors here. They'll let you know your options."

"You said you'd help me."

"Our counselors—" I raised my hand, a shield.

"You," the girl said. "You said *you* would."

When the demonstration outside the abortion clinic turns into a brawl, Kim disappears. She calls a few days later, and Weaver's offer to help is again cloaked within the safety of the organization. Kim hangs up on him.

Desperate and determined to help, Weaver tracks down Kim, knowing that "sometimes, when a person is truly lost in this world, suffocating inside her private bubble where all she can hear is her own droning heartbeat, a touch can be enough."

When Kim's former boyfriend destroys her apartment, Weaver finds he has "no choice" but to invite her to stay at his apartment. Then, when Lucas Boone is accused of rape, the "Conscience Squad" is disbanded. Weaver is glad for an excuse to take Kim home to her family, as he is disturbed to find himself attracted to her. They travel first to her home, and then to Weaver's home as Weaver strives to "save" both Kim and her unborn child. To save, because he finds it safer to save Kim than to fall in love with her.

> "I really wish you'd read that book I gave you . . .," I said.
>
> "Hold me," said Kim. "I'm scared."
>
> I stepped back. "You're fine. Let's get you packed."
>
> Kim's child, however, was still alive, still growing, and that was something I could be proud of. I thought of the cluster of cells inside her womb curled up in fluid, tiny fingers. I dreamed about it almost every night. I imagined the child was a boy and that he would grow up strong and healthy, surrounded by a loving circle of relatives and friends. Of course, he would never know what I had done for him, but I would know, and that would be enough.

Kirn's book is both a love story and an exploration of the paradoxes of moral guardianship. Fans of Walter Kirn's *My Hard Bargain* will enjoy his first novel as well. And for those who were dissatisfied with his stories for one reason or another, read *She Needed Me*. It's for any human being who has any desire at all to become more human, and in doing so, to become more like God.